III
Tearmoon Empire
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Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Granddaughter and Grandmother

Archnemesis

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the Empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. With her diary from her previous life in hand, she tries everything she can to avoid a repeat encounter

Miabel

Mia's future granddaughter who leapt backwards through time. Goes by "Bel."

Revolution

Archnemesis

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. He was about to be transferred to the middle of nowhere, but Mia stepped in and saved his career. He believes Mia to be a great leader bestowed upon him by the heavens.

Archnemesis

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Anne

Mia's maid. Born into a poor family of merchants. She helped Mia in her previous life and is now a devout Mia fanatic.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army and was revered as the Saint of the Empire. Now, she is Mia's classmate and looks up to her.

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart.

Liora

Tiona's maid. She is from a tribe that lives in the Sealence Forest.

Dion

The captain of a hundred-man squad. The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

※ Future Timeline Relationship

※ Previous Timeline Relationship

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic. But a competent one.

ASSISTANCE

Sion

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's archnemesis, helping Tiona and eventually becoming known as the Penal King. Now, he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed for a certain project.

Holy Principality of Belluga

SUPPORT

SUPPORT

Rafina

The Duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's student council president and the school's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he is starting to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

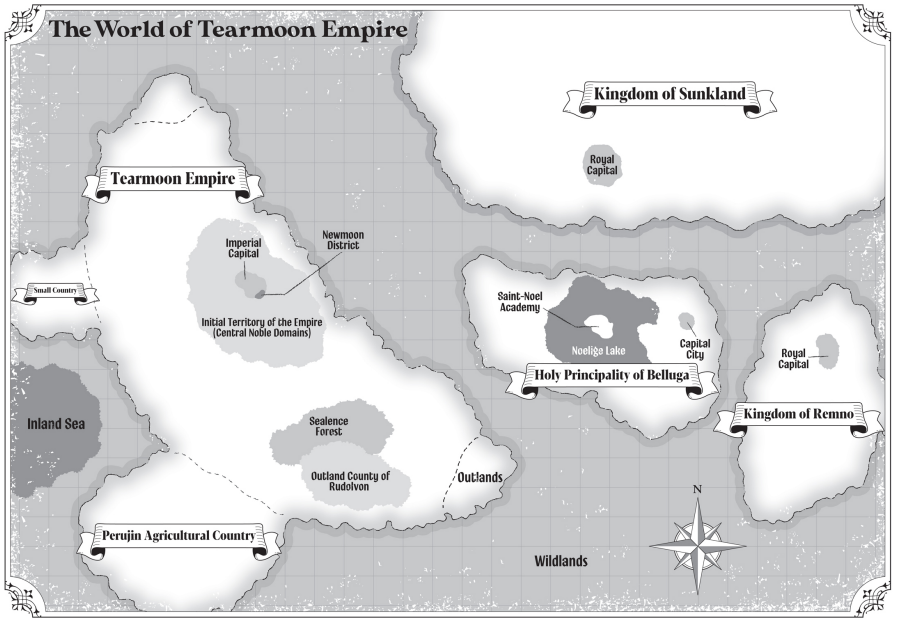
The only heir of Forkroad & Co., whose business spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, is executed, only to wake up a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backwards through time. With a second chance at life, she resolves to fix the ills that plague the Empire so she doesn't end up at the guillotine again. With the help of her previous life's memories and a healthy dose of overly-generous interpretation of her actions by those around her, she successfully stockpiles wheat for the oncoming famine and averts civil war. With those deeds done, her diary from the past finally vanishes, only for a revolution to break out in the neighboring Kingdom of Remno. In order to reconvene with Prince Abel, she sneaks into Remno with some friends, Sion included, and ends up unwittingly pacifying the revolution.


The World of Tearmoon Empire
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Small Country
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Saint-Noel Academy
Noeliga Lake
Capital City
Holy Principality of Belluga
Royal Capital
Kingdom of Remno
Inland Sea
Sealence Forest
Outland County of Rudolvon
Outlands
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

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Part 2: The Lodestar Girl

Prologue: With That Proud Name Held Close to Your Heart!

A lone girl ran amongst the desolate ruins of the place that was once her home. Once hailed as “The City Graced by the Moon” for its enchanting beauty, the imperial capital was now a smoldering shadow of its former self. Ravaged time and again by the horrors of war, it lay barren and wasted. Scattered debris served as the skyline of a lawless land. Vaguely humanoid dried-out husks littered the streets. Once they were people. Now they were not even corpses. The crumbling cityscape looked bleaker than even the Newmoon District of old. For those who remained there, it was no slum; it was a wilderness of brick and stone.

Which was why the sight of a young girl being pursued by a group of armed men failed to move any residents to action. She ran and ran, breaths coming in ragged gasps. Her argent hair yearned to be washed; blackened by soot and sweat, it had lost its platinum luster. Mud dotted her cheeks, the dark smears in sharp contrast with her pallid skin. Her thin shoulders rose and fell laboriously as she struggled to draw enough breath to supply what few muscles remained on her emaciated frame.

Still, she kept going, forcing her legs to take step after agonizing step as she looked backward again and again at her pursuers with the desperate, terrified energy of prey trying to escape death. She ran until the dull ache of fatigue turned into the burning pain of depletion, and then she ran some more. On and on she went; the sorrow, the fear, and the fire in her lungs and limbs blurring into a shapeless mass of agony that threatened to crush her heart. Then, it happened — her strength failed her; she stumbled and tripped.

“Ah—”

She hit the ground hard, and the object she’d been clutching slid away from her across the uneven road. It was an old book. Having been condemned to the fiery fate of biblioclasm, few copies remained in the world. Inscribed across its cover was the title, “Princess Mia Chronicles.” She crawled hastily toward it.

“...Mother Elise.”

The girl recalled the gentle smile of its deceased author, who’d raised her as her own daughter.

“Listen, Bel. What’s written in this book is the truth, and it’s a truth that you must know — about your grandmother, and what kind of person she was... No matter how many falsehoods the world tries to bury it with, you alone need to know what really happened...”

So said the younger of her two foster mothers before giving her an affectionate pat on the head.

“Mother Anne...”

The girl named Bel recalled the tender embrace of another person, who’d given her unconditional love and support.

“Go, dear. Go, and hold that proud name close to your heart. Her blood flows through you. You can’t die here. Go! Run!”

So said the older of her foster mothers before pulling her into a hug, her smile as warm as the blood streaming down her chest.

They were the faces of the people Bel loved. Kind, compassionate faces, which she’d never see again.

“Auntie Tiona... Auntie Chloe... Mr. Ludwig... Uncle Dion...”

Everyone was gone. Everyone who’d shown her kindness had died... to protect her. Before they had, however, they’d all spoken the same words — some with regret, others with a bitter smile. But without fail, they’d all said the same thing.

“If only she were still alive... It wouldn’t have turned out this way...”

Were that saintly lady of boundless compassion, the Great Sage of the Empire, still amongst them, the empire... and the world... would surely have avoided this terrible fate. This *she*, extolled by everyone Bel knew, was absent in her own memories. All she could recall was the vague sense of a gentle disposition. This was why all her knowledge about the revered figure came from books.

She was undoubtedly a person who’d earned her title, and the Great Sage of the Empire was many things. As a saint, she was a paragon of compassion and benevolence; as a princess, she was the

savior of her nation. After a certain point, it had become taboo to speak of her or the imperial family. Even so, when the moon was low and ears were sparse, people would speak of her in hushed voices, their faces blossoming into fond smiles at every repetition of her name.

That filled Bel with pride. The thought that the same blood flowed through her veins was like a shining beacon in her heart.

"Finally give up, kid?"

A gruff voice pulled her out of the tender world of past memories and dropped her back into reality. She looked up to find a man in crude leather armor. He wore a predatory smile.

"Look, we don't wanna do this either, but that bounty on your head is just too fat to pass up. Don't take it personally, all right?"

Beside him, another man drew the sword at his waist.

"Get up. You're coming with us. Oh, and just so you know, you're wanted dead or alive, so I'll just kill you if you try to run. The gallows or my sword. Pick your poison."

"Gotta say though, this kid's so filthy I can't even tell if she's the right one. Where's that wanted poster... Hey, kid, what's your name? And you'd better tell the truth..."

His menacing aura enveloped her like the tendrils of some deep sea horror. Fear filled her heart, and she trembled.

Mother... I'm scared... I'm so scared.

She pressed the book she held even more tightly against her chest.

Help me... Grandmother...

Just then, the voices of those she loved echoed faintly in her head.

"Hold that proud name close to your heart... and go! May you live... far and wide... Tell them... about her..."

Suddenly, she remembered — what it meant, who she was, and what she'd inherited. The blood coursing through her veins was passed down to her by the one who stood as a symbol of hope for her people. It struck her like a bolt of lightning, resuscitating a torrent of emotions that pushed against her chest. The trembling of her body didn't stop, but it changed character. Gone was the oppressing weight of fear, it was replaced by the rising tension of defiance. The raging storm within her pushed her to her feet. She fixed the men with a gaze of silent intensity, her blue eyes filled with pure, radiant resolve.

“Stand down, insolent knaves!”

Pride straightened her back and steadied her voice. Standing with her held head high, she managed to cut an imposing, though diminutive, figure. Determined to conduct herself in a manner befitting a descendant of the Great Sage of the Empire, she unwittingly radiated an aura of gravitas that wholly eclipsed what the real thing had ever been capable of. Then, she declared aloud that proud name she bore.

“My name is Miabel! Miabel Luna Tearmoon! She who inherits the noble blood of the Saint and Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon!”

All of a sudden, there was a burst of blinding light. The book she held to her chest flipped open, and words rose from its pages. They floated in the air, sheathed in a golden glow, before unraveling into gilded strands that wound themselves around her body.

“Ah— Huh? What?”

She stared in shock as she was lifted into the air. The next instant, both strands and girl vanished without a trace.

...Thus did the sands of time shift their flow.

Chapter 1: The Great Sage of the Empire and Her Spring Break of Elegance

The titular Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, was currently enjoying her spring break in a most elegant fashion. In her room in the female dormitory of Saint-Noel Academy, she was elegantly sprawled across her enormous bed. Every so often, she would elegantly roll from one side to the other, going all the way until she was at the very edge. Then, as if to flaunt its sheer size, she would roll — again, elegantly — back in the other direction. For a bit of variety, she would occasionally rotate herself and roll — repeat after me, *elegantly* — lengthwise instead of side to side. Sometimes, she would even hug her pillow and roll it with her.

"Ahh! I'm so bored," she whined as she idled her time away elegantly.

Elegantly was, of course, a euphemism for *like a lazy degenerate*.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. She had intended to spend her spring break in the empire indulging in all sorts of fun activities until school started. Circumstances, however, had confined her to Saint-Noel. After departing safely from the Kingdom of Remno, rather than stopping over at home, she'd gone straight back to Saint-Noel, where she remained until the winter holidays. That turned out to be a very bad idea. Her extended absence from the empire meant that when she did actually return, she was greeted by a teary-eyed and excessively hug-prone Emperor.

"Ohhh! Mia! My dear daughter Mia! What in the moons have you been doing out there?! And why haven't you come back home sooner?!"

After thoroughly assaulting her personal space, he inflicted upon her a cruel and unusual punishment for her recklessness. It was the kind of deeply humiliating penalty that dealt a devastating blow to her pride. Specifically...

"Until next winter, you are to call me *Dad*. No other forms of

address shall be permitted."

Cruel and unusual indeed.

"Y-You can't! Th-That's— But, Father!"

"*Dad*, I said! Dad! I'm not going to respond to anything else!"

The light faded from Mia's eyes as she watched her dear father turn his face away with a pouty *hmph*. For a long time, she stood there like a ceramic doll, her expression devoid of life. Eventually, the full implications of her situation dawned on her, and she pressed her fingers to her temples.

Ugh, I feel a headache coming on.

She later discovered that things only got worse after she abided by his decree. Exuberant that his dear daughter was finally calling him "Dad," the Emperor started paying her visits with increasing frequency, which she found to be profoundly annoying. Mia, you see, was at that age where she didn't get along very well with her parents — her previous life notwithstanding.

As for the others who were implicated in the Remno incident, they all got off scot-free. No charges were pressed against Ludwig, Dion, Tiona, or Anne. Instead, they were commended for trying their best to protect the rampaging Mia as she dragged them along on her crazy adventure. At least, that was how she decided to frame their involvement. Anything even remotely close to the truth would end with their heads rolling, so she didn't have much choice. Still, she couldn't help but feel a little peeved by the fact that she was the only one who had to suffer a penalty.

After a thoroughly disagreeable winter vacation, Mia returned to school determined to stay the hell away from home until the decree became null and void. When spring rolled around, she deliberately stayed at Saint-Noel in order to avoid another trip to the empire. Which felt great for all of two days before boredom started to sink in.

"Ahhh, I'm so terribly bored. There's nothing to do. Chloe's not here. Abel's not here either..."

The friends she usually spent her time with were all absent from the academy. Rafina was still here, of course, but she wasn't exactly *that* kind of friend; while Mia was willing to attend any gatherings Rafina invited her to, she didn't feel like seeking the girl out otherwise. As a result, her activities were limited to strolling with Anne around the island town sampling the various sweets on offer, occasional horse-back riding, and overdosing on sleep.

In other words, she lived the life of a self-indulgent layabout.

"Milady..."

Anne stepped into the room and, upon witnessing the awful sight of her egregiously indolent mistress, responded with... neither disappointment nor disgust. Instead, she gazed at Mia with a tender expression, as though she were looking at an adorable little sister.

Lately, Anne had come to a realization — Mia was not particularly fond of studying. Having helped her study for her finals just a few days ago, Anne had seen firsthand how hard she had to work to learn the material. She had watched Mia, tears of frustration in her eyes, desperately scribble down notes as she combed through textbooks. In the end, she was rewarded for her efforts by placing among the top twenty in her grade. For reference, there were only about eighty students in her grade, but still, being in the top quarter was a brilliant achievement for Mia that would have been wholly unthinkable in the previous timeline. The cause of her desperation was, of course, the classic culprit — procrastination. After neglecting to study properly until the finals were upon her, she crammed her heart out and was now totally spent. The rebound lethargy on display reminded Anne of her younger sisters, and she couldn't help but smile fondly at the sight.

I see that studying for tests really isn't Mia's forte.

Despite this new discovery, Anne's respect for Mia didn't waver in the slightest. In fact...

She's barely older than my little sisters... but those tiny shoulders of hers are saddled with so much responsibility...

...Her reverence for Mia only deepened. There was something stirring to the knowledge that her dear mistress's wisdom was not a natural gift but the result of honest effort, and she was capsized by a wave of emotion.

That's why... I have to make sure I do everything I can to support her.

Quietly, she made her new school year's resolution.

When she can afford to unwind, I need to help her relax, and when it's time to shape up, I need to get tough on her. She's the kind of person who will understand as long as I explain myself properly, so I need to think about what things I can do to lighten her load.

Unbeknownst to Mia, her maid-in-waiting was about to become her manager as well.

Seeing as it was spring break, Anne had every intention of letting Mia lounge around to her heart's content, but that wouldn't do for today.

"Milady," she said as she approached the bed.

One of Mia's eyelids lifted slowly in a lazy acknowledgment.

"Mmmmm... Anne. Nice timing... Would you mind sitting down and singing a lullaby for—"

"My deepest apologies, milady, but you may wish to reconsider your nap. Miss Rafina has invited you to her afternoon tea party."

"My? Miss Rafina? But didn't I just attend one yesterday—"

"According to the invitation, Prince Abel will be arriving today, so she hoped you would join them for the afternoon."

"My! Is that so?" Mia's other eye snapped open as well, and her expression brightened immediately. She sat up in her bed, and her voice lost its sleepy drawl. "I thought he was coming back later. Oh, could it be that he heard I'm staying at the academy, so he came back early for me?"

Anne watched fondly as Mia morphed from lazy bed-roller to the capable princess she knew and loved.

"Anne, pick out a dress for me! There's no time to lose!"

The Great Sage of the Empire had returned in all her commanding glory — from the neck up, at least. The rest of her was clothed in wrinkly pajamas that had endured significant abuse.

Chapter 2: Princess Mia Experiences Romance Overload!

After hopping off her bed, Mia immediately got down to business. Her first destination was... the bath, of course.

“Ahhhh, it really is wonderful to be able to take a bath whenever I want!”

For those who are interested, as a bath aficionado, Mia’s morning routine began with a beeline to the tub. Taking a hot bath after waking certainly had the effect of improving circulation, and it was a habit that enjoyed widespread approval in Saint-Noel, but Mia’s baths were something else.

“Mmmmm... I can feel the heat soaking into me... It’s making me sort of sleepy...” she mumbled as she considered returning to her bed for a second wind — of napping, that is.

Mia’s baths were not just baths; they were exercises in hedonism.

Ultimately, she abandoned the notion and quickly dried herself off. Despite a truncated application of her usual treatment routine, her skin and hair had retained their usual luster. After donning a freshly-cleaned dress and accessorizing to maximize her charm, she made her way to Rafina’s chamber.

“Ah, Mia, you’re here.”

“Greetings, Miss Rafina. Thank you for inviting me to this tea party.”

She tugged at her skirt and performed an elegant curtsy at the door before stepping into the room.

“Hey, Mia. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you.”

“My! Abel, you’re already here!”

“I just got here, actually. And you... are especially beautiful today,” he said with a bright smile that immediately reddened her cheeks.

“M-M-My! Abel! When did you become such a smooth talker? You shouldn’t say things like that to girls too often, you know? It’ll

make you look like a womanizer!" she replied, trying her best to keep her cool.

Abel, however, looked hurt.

"I... didn't think you saw me that way. I wouldn't say that to anyone else. Only you, because I honestly think so."

This, while ostensibly a reasonable clarification of his intent, was effectively the follow-up right hook to his opening left jab, and it knocked the sense right out of her for a good few seconds. She stared at him in a daze as an amorous sigh escaped her lips. Inside her head, she was experiencing full-on romance overload, and her overheated brain struggled to string simple thoughts together.

Wh-Wh-What is his deal? Sweet moons, Abel! A-Are you innocent or an imbecile? You can't just say stuff like that in public!

She was brought back to her senses by the sound of someone politely clearing his throat.

"Ahem. Princess Mia... I would greatly appreciate it if you would refrain from overtly ignoring my master."

"Keithwood! You came as well? Then... Oh, Sion, you're here too."

Sion's shoulders visibly sagged at her remark. He turned to his attendant.

"...Keithwood, I've never had any desire to win the affections of women. If anything, they were always the ones to approach me, and I always found their advances a tad vexing. But tell me... was that the folly of a young man, blind to his own privilege? I thought myself a decent person, but strip away the fame and fortune, and what remains? Is it but a sad creature deserving of such scorn?"

The sight of the crestfallen Sion was too much for her guilty conscience to bear, and she hurried to comfort him.

"O-Oh, please, Sion. Don't take it so seriously. It was just a joke. Of course I wanted to see you too. I'm glad that you're doing well."

At that, Sion immediately looked up, his despondent frown replaced by a smug grin.

"Ah, good. Because I was joking as well."

"Wha—?!"

"It's good to know that we were mutually facetious. I wished to see you too, and I'm equally glad that you're doing well. Also..." His grin deepened. "I see that you're still as gullible— Ahem, good-natured as ever, Mia."

"What?!"

Mia's face reddened again, but this time, it was in anger overload.

Th-This little brat! I swear he's gotten even meaner than before! Is it because of the kick? I bet it is! He's still holding a grudge against me for kicking his smug little butt!

She was about to fiercely rebuke him when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Looking over, she found Abel wearing a thoroughly puzzled frown.

“What do you mean, Prince Sion? That good-naturedness is exactly why she’s so beautiful.”

“…Eh?”

Abel’s sweet words hit her like an uppercut and robbed her of her voice again. Her cheeks grew redder than they’d ever been, and she let out another long, amorous sigh as she indulged in another moment of romance overload.

Slightly inebriated by the thick scent of romcom in the air, her senses were dulled and she let down her guard. The bloody diary had vanished, and she’d been freed from the terror of the guillotine blade. Furthermore, she’d managed to escape from the perilous situation in Remno without so much as a scratch. Her string of successes had dulled her sense of danger. Like a bear deep in hibernation, she was oblivious to the new perils creeping up on her.

“Excuse me. Huh? Princess Mia?”

The next people to step into the room were Tiona Rudolvon and her attendant, Liora Lulu.

“My, the two of you were invited too? How’s Cyril doing?”

“Ah, he’s doing quite well, Your Highness. He’s studying hard and looking forward to attending classes at the school you’re building.”

“I see. I’m very glad to hear tha— Hm?”

At last, her survival instincts kicked in, sending a chill up her spine.

Wait a minute… Something about this seems off… The people here, they’re…

Sion and Abel, and now Tiona… These were all the accomplices who’d followed her into Remno. The fact that they were all gathered here made her uneasy. Alas, it had taken too long for her sense of danger to reawaken, and she’d lost her chance to escape.

“It would appear that the whole cast has been assembled. Let us begin the tea party then,” said a delighted Rafina.

Something about her smile told Mia that new dangers were right around the corner, and she was about to be sucked into them.

Chapter 3: Jam, Tea, and Chaos Serpents

"My, Miss Rafina! These cookies are absolutely delicious!" exclaimed Mia after taking a bite.

Whatever ill premonitions she may have had were quickly forgotten in the face of tasty sweets. Mia, after all, was not one to dwell. It was one of her virtues. Or maybe one of her vices. It was hard to tell sometimes.

"Are they now? I'm glad you like them," said Rafina, bringing her hands together in an enthusiastic clap. She smiled pointedly before continuing. "By the way, about that Jem fellow you sent here to be placed under my care... I'd just like you to know that I've been taking *very* good care of him. As you instructed, I've been giving him daily lectures."

The poor man. Mia took a sip from her cup to hide a smirk. *Hah. Serves him right.*

The thought that she'd seen the last of Jem's despicable face made her all the smugger, and she relished the moment as the savory aroma of black tea filled her nose.

Ahhh, now that I've gotten that off my chest, I feel better already. Silly me, thinking something seemed off. There's nothing wrong here.

Seeing the satisfied grin on Mia's face, Rafina gave a knowing nod.

"Aha, so you did indeed know about who he was working for. I expected nothing less from you, Mia."

...Huh? Who's working for who now?

Fortunately for Mia, Sion spoke up, drawing everyone's attention away from the clueless expression on her face.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Miss Rafina. The perpetrators were all my own people. They belonged to Sunkland's spy agency."

"Indeed, they were Wind Crows. White Crows, to be exact. Sunkland's premier specialists in information warfare." Rafina

smiled. “All of whom were upstanding, purehearted people.”

“Upstanding and... purehearted...”

Even Sion lifted an eyebrow at that. Those were not the kind of adjectives usually associated with spies.

“All except Jem,” continued Rafina, pointedly keeping her tone light and playful, “who was a little different. Everyone else was quite happy to listen to me read from the scriptures, but Jem didn’t seem to appreciate it at all. He reacted rather negatively to my sermons.”

“Rather negatively?”

“Yes. His antagonism seemed quite visceral.”

That made Mia curious. All of the nations in this region were part of a single prevailing religious sphere centered around the Holy Principality of Belluga, which was the home of the Central Orthodox Church. Their morality and beliefs were based on the Holy Book of Belluga, and while the particulars inevitably differed from individual to individual, the overarching value system was deeply embedded within the vast majority of people living here. Therefore, while Rafina’s lectures could certainly bore her audience through the tedium of familiarity, they shouldn’t elicit such a strong sense of antipathy — especially from spies, whose work demanded a great deal of pragmatism. It was entirely possible that they weren’t even religious to begin with, in which case a young girl’s sermons on morality should simply enter one ear and leave straight out the other. Jem, meanwhile...

“In fact, he seemed to be gripped by panic,” Rafina added.

The religious should welcome her lectures. The secular could feign interest or, should that require more effort than they could muster, display overt apathy. To be incapable of even ignoring her suggested a belief in an opposing faith. In other words...

“Oh no... Is he... a demoniac?” asked Tiona, her voice a fearful whisper.

The question caught Rafina off guard, and she blinked the surprise out of her eyes before saying, “Ah. Right. I suppose there are such people.”

God was opposed by an entity known as the Archdaemon, and lower-ranking demons in its service could possess people and cause them to act maliciously. Those under such malevolent influence were known as demoniacs. In Belluga, people called exorcists were tasked with handling the victims of possession.

“To my knowledge, demoniacs don’t act like he does. They thrash about like wild beasts. Cerebral undertakings such as gathering accomplices to plot conspiracies seem to be beyond them. That’s why I suspect that whatever is fueling Jem’s actions is something else entirely.”

“Something else, huh...” said Abel, joining the conversation with a serious expression. As a victim of the plot in Remno, the culprit’s true identity was of great relevance to him. “Judging by your tone, Miss Rafina, it sounds like you already know who or what this *something else* is.”

Meanwhile, his trans-dimensional counterpart, Mia, who’d played his role in the previous timeline, was preoccupied by thoughts of jam. Having discovered a jar of it on the table, she had been eagerly awaiting the chance to add it to her tea and had little mental capacity left for its phonemic cousin. Mia preferred jam over Jem.

Ahhh, I thought this tea would go great with wild strawberry jam, and I was right. *In fact, it tastes even better than I expected.*

The rest of her companions continued discussing the far more serious topic of Jem.

“You’re absolutely correct, Prince Abel. I do indeed have my suspicions already, and it’s not demoniacs. I believe the threat we face is far more grounded in the material world.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

Rafina paused for a moment to take an elegant sip of her tea before declaring in a quiet but potent voice, “A group of destruction-seeking vandals who are a menace to Belluga, the Central Orthodox Church, and quite possibly the whole world. They are a secret society that has been operating in the shadows throughout history, and they are known as the Chaos Serpents.”

She spoke their name with a rare grimace, as though the very sound of it disgusted her.

“Chaos Serpents... The name is foreign to my ears. Are they some sort of demonic cult, then?” asked Sion with a frown.

The worship of the Archdaemon or its subservient demons was hardly unheard of, and there was a constant cycle of heretical cults popping up, only to be shunned by the populace before fading away into obscurity. At Sion’s question, however, some hesitancy entered Rafina’s voice.

“Probably... Unfortunately, the particulars of their doctrine

remain a mystery. In fact, nothing is known about them except two things. The first is that they hate the Holy Book of our God, from which we can infer that they likely worship the Archdaemon." She took a moment to look around, meeting the gazes of everyone present before continuing. "The second... is that their goal is the complete destruction of all man-made order. The latter, while less theologically significant, is in my opinion a far more concrete threat."

"The destruction of order..." echoed Sion, his tone matching her in graveness. "Care to elaborate?"

"Of *all* order. Nations, laws, cultures and academics... Everything up to and including the peaceful mundanity of our everyday lives."

Abel looked incredulous — and for good reason — as he considered the implications of this ideology when pushed to its logical conclusion.

"These people sound like they'd be the enemy of all nations. Hell, the enemy of humanity as a whole. Are you telling me there are people this dangerous in the world, and everyone just lets them be?"

"Of course not. We certainly haven't been letting them be. However, they are everywhere. They could be a noble or a merchant, a peasant or an official. Send out an army to stamp out heretics, and you might later discover the commander was one of them," said Rafina, shaking her head as she let out a sigh that contained a bit too much frustration for her examples to be entirely theoretical. "They have embedded themselves within our nations, melting into our society and hiding amongst us with incredible cunning. I suppose you could say they're almost like spies, though I must admit I never expected to find one of them working as the real thing."

They could be anywhere and anyone, and there was no way to tell, making it exceedingly difficult to weed them out.

"And when it comes to Demon-worshiping cults, normally, their members live together at some shrine or temple," said Sion, thinking out loud as he continued her train of thought. "Sometimes, they can gather in large numbers and engage in hostile dissent, causing damage to nearby villages, but... I see. Whereas their tendency to congregate makes it easy to stamp them out, the elusiveness of these Serpents makes them a far more troublesome

foe, which means... Ah. Of course. So that's why we're seated here today. Having already acted in direct opposition to a Serpent, you knew for certain that we were not among them."

"I couldn't have said it better myself." Rafina nodded with satisfaction. "Thank you, Prince Sion. It's so very nice to know we're all on the same page."

Then, she turned to Mia, who immediately felt all her sweat glands go into overdrive.

Huh? Why is she— Uh oh, this is one of those "I have no idea what's going on but I'm definitely not allowed to ask" situations, isn't it?

Mia's cowardly instincts promptly sounded the alarms in her head. Sadly, it was too late to be of any use. From the moment she chose to attend this tea party, or maybe even the moment she suggested shipping Jem off to Rafina to avoid having to deal with him, her fate had been sealed; she was already a part of this.

What has any of this got to do with me? How come she called me here too? Maybe she just wanted to keep us updated on what's going on with Jem. That has to be it, right? She's only telling us all this so we get the full picture. This is just her padding things out with background information and has absolutely nothing to do with me specifically.

Holding on to what she knew was a thin sliver of hope, she looked back at Rafina, who smiled at her.

"I'm sure this will come as no surprise to you, Mia, but do allow me to indulge in a bit of formalities..." she said before clearing her throat. "I, Rafina Orca Belluga, formally request your aid in establishing a united front against the Chaos Serpents, as well as your participation in its efforts to counter their activities!"

Chapter 4: Wish Upon a Book

Wait... Is it just me, or am I in serious trouble right now...?

Mia's instincts, finally awakened from their sweets-induced stupor, were now issuing her a dire warning: this request was incomparably more dangerous than even the recent attempt at revolution in Remno.

S-Sweet moons! I-I need to figure out how to decline her offer...

She began wracking her brains for an exit strategy, only to discover it was far too late.

"Like Prince Sion so generously explained, the Serpents are everywhere. That's why you are the only ones I can talk to right now."

"Hm... Mm? Wait a minute," said Abel with a puzzled frown, "if they react to the Holy Book, can't you use that to weed them out?"

Sion shook his head. "No, that probably won't work. Remember what happened with the White Crows? The central instigator of the incident was indeed Jem, but it was the rest of the members doing the actual legwork."

"I see... It's not just this secret society of Chaos Serpents we're up against. It's also the people they're manipulating..." mused Abel.

"Exactly," said Rafina. "These are cunning people who will take great care to avoid situations that might expose them to be Serpents. They'd never appear in places where they might be subject to a reading of the Holy Book. At most, they'd send one of the people they're manipulating."

"When you put it like that, it's sort of a miracle we managed to capture that Jem guy," said Abel as he looked to Mia with a sense of admiration.

"It is indeed. And despite the circumstances, I still have a room full of people here that I can fully trust. I think I should actually consider myself lucky," said Rafina with a gentle smile as she turned toward Mia as well. "None of this would have been possible without your help, Mia. I'm so glad to have you as a friend."

"Uh, erm, d-don't even mention it! We're, um, friends. And

friends help each other, right?"

"They most certainly do," agreed Rafina with a pleasant nod.

"I see... Well, if Mia's on board, then I certainly can't back out. My kingdom was also a direct victim of their actions, so I'd be happy to help," said Abel with a firm nod.

Wait, what? I... I'm on board? When did I say that? I'm pretty sure I never—

"In that case, count me in too. Considering they even managed to infiltrate my kingdom's spy agency, this is hardly a problem I can afford to ignore. Since there's no telling who might be on their side, I'd prefer to have a trustworthy circle of people with whom I can share information."

As Sion pledged his support, Tiona quickly followed suit.

"Um, I don't know what I can do, but I'd like to help too."

Mia, faced with the development of an uncomfortable new reality...

Mmmm, the exquisite sweetness of this cookie... it really hits the spot. Delicious. Simply delicious.

...Had opted for good old escapism.

How can sweets possibly taste this good? Oh, I know! This is a dream, isn't it? It has to be! Pretty soon, I'll wake up in the morning going, "Awww, and I was just about to eat some more too." Look. I'll make it happen right now. I'm going to reach for that terribly tantalizing cake, and I'll wake up right before I touch it...

It didn't work. Undeterred, she reached for the next piece. And then the next. Even after devouring every last thing on the table, she did not wake up. She did, however, get a good scolding from Anne later for eating so much that she had to skip dinner.

"Ugh... I guess it wasn't a dream after all..."

The next evening, after finally coming to terms with the fact that the events of the previous day were real, Mia began taking action. She had, after all, wrestled her fate at the guillotine into submission and won herself a new lease on life. She might not look like a hardened survivor, but she was well aware that the longer she lazed about, the more likely it was for a bad situation to get much, much worse.

This did not change the fact that Mia generally wished to avoid anything that even remotely resembled hard work. Whenever possible, she'd prefer to cheat and save herself the effort. In

accordance with this penchant of hers, she began pining for something that would make things easier.

"Oh, I wish I had something to point the way for me so I could avoid all the dangers down the road. Something like that diary..."

To her dismay, no such thing materialized. Her diary was still gone. Granted, even if it had reappeared, she wasn't particularly excited to read about her days leading up to the guillotine again, either.

"Speaking of which... Didn't I see a similar item recently?"

Something had made her say something to the effect of "Oh, I guess this is just like that diary" not too long ago, and she struggled to recall what.

Then, it hit her.

"Oh, now I remember! It was that history book! Maybe I'll find something relevant in there!"

The book had contained a description of the future that vanished in front of her eyes. She'd gone over the book a few more times afterward, but the passage never reappeared. Now, however, she had a feeling that might change. Figuring the sooner she found out the better, she hopped off her bed and made her way toward the library.

Saint-Noel Academy's library was situated in the common area of a building that joined the boys' dormitory to the girls'. Books were valuable items, and the entrance to the library was guarded by staff, but access was not heavily restricted. So long as the books stayed in the library, they could be read freely by not only students but attendants as well, making it a fairly busy place. Unless, of course, everyone was gone for the holidays.

There wasn't a soul in sight as Mia walked in, and she quickly spotted the book she was looking for.

"Okay, well. It can't possibly be this easy..."

She scoured the book from cover to cover, but the passage in question was nowhere to be found.

"Oh, wait a minute... Didn't that passage mention it was actually an excerpt from some other book? What was it again? Princess Mia Chronicles, I think?" She paused. With a grimace, she said the title out loud again. "Princess Mia Chronicles..."

She did not like the sound of that title — for good reason. Imagine, if you will, you were staring at a book whose title was

your name, followed by “Chronicles.” How would that make you feel? A bit morbid, no?

“...Do I really want to read something like that? It sounds like the kind of book that’ll leave me feeling depressed.”

Still, she tried looking for it, but nowhere in the shelves could she find a book titled “Princess Mia Chronicles.” Fatigued from her search, she seated herself in a nearby chair.

“Ah, figures. Not that I held out much hope to begin with,” she muttered to herself in an attempt to ease her disappointment. “Oh moons, how I wish I could have some guidance... It doesn’t have to be as detailed as that diary, but *something*... A lodestar to guide my way...”

She gazed wistfully up at the ceiling.

“Maybe something will just fall out of the sky...”

For a few seconds, she entertained the ultimate fancy of the indolent. When it became clear that no savior would be descending from the ceiling, she let out a woeful sigh and got up to go.

All of a sudden, a bright flash of golden light assaulted her eyes.

“Hyaah?!”

She let out a yelp so loud it would have earned her a stern scolding from the absent librarian before falling backward onto the ground.

“Wh-Wh-What in the moons?! What’s going on?!”

She quickly scooted away from the source of light on her hands and rear. Only after placing some distance between them did she stop to take a good look at it. As the glow slowly waned, the faint shape of a person appeared. She rubbed her eyes, wondering if they were deceiving her.

“Wh-What... is that?”

Just then, something occurred to her — something *very* alarming. This was a very large and empty library, and she was here all by herself. Furthermore, her current position near the back wall was extremely removed from the entrance where the staff member stood. The air here was stale, and it was uncomfortably dark and quiet. Basically, it was a pretty creepy place.

Now, to make things clear, Mia was not the type to believe in ghosts. Officially, anyway.

“O-Ohohoho. Gh-Ghosts? Don’t be silly. Only children believe in those. Th-They don’t actually exist. N-No one-eyed monsters... no evil fairies that take away your teeth... no demons that possess your

body... N-None of those are true!”

After all, she was a mature, twenty-something lady on the inside. It would be ridiculous for her to still believe in ghosts and goblins. Grown-ups like her simply didn’t—

Patter... Patter...

She froze. The sound came from the light, which she suddenly noticed was *getting closer*. It flickered and dimmed, revealing more of the distinctly human figure inside as it crawled across the ground toward her.

Mia screamed. Rather, she wanted to scream, but her voice was gone. She repeatedly opened and closed her mouth in a pitiful display. Her mind wanted to call for Anne, but fear had robbed her of breath. Then, the ghostly figure reached out with one of its slender arms, and the sheer horror of that sight was enough to jolt her into action. Acting on pure primal instinct, she leapt to her feet and *bolted*, dashing at full speed in terrified silence all the way to her room, after which she promptly dove into her bed and pulled the covers over her.

...Later, when Anne was comforting the sniffling Mia in her bed by gently stroking her head as one would a crying baby, she said, “Oh, milady, it’s okay. Ghosts aren’t real. You probably just had a bad dream. There, there...”

For the sake of Mia’s reputation, Anne chose to keep the events of that night a secret.

Chapter 5: Princess Mia… Is in Tiptop Form!

While Mia was busy rehabilitating herself from her traumatic experience in the library, the season changed, and winter gave way to spring. School started anew, and Mia was now a second-year student. She'd turn fourteen the next winter.

"I'm done being scared of nonexistent things like ghosts! It's time for me to start sleeping by myself again!"

Her declaration was followed by her self-proclaimed graduation from Anne's bed, which she'd been sleeping in throughout the entirety of the spring break. As a proud alumnus of tandem sleeping, she was now inducting herself into the world of solo slumber. For the sake of her reputation, it should be made clear that her decision was made entirely arbitrarily. It was definitely not because her friends coming back for the new school term made everything feel a little less scary. That would be juvenile, and Mia did not operate by juvenile principles.

With that thought out of the way, Mia proceeded to greet her friends with all the enthusiasm of an excited child.

"Now then. Can anyone decipher this emblem for me? Princess Mia, would you like to try?"

On a large whiteboard at the front of the classroom was an emblem drawn in a special red-colored sap-based paint. Mia took a quick glance at it before rising confidently to her feet.

"Hmhmm. That's a piece of cake!" she said as she strolled up to the whiteboard, gathering the gazes of all her peers in the process.

Her class was currently learning heraldry, which was the study of crests and the meanings inscribed in them. For noble children in particular, the ability to decipher and recognize individuals and lineages from their emblems was a necessary skill.

"Let's see…"

She stopped in front of the emblem and studied its components.

There were strict rules dictating how emblems were to be constructed. If a noble man married a noble woman, they would generally each take half of their own emblem and combine them into a new one. For example, if Mia were to marry Abel, their new emblem would be a fusion of their existing ones, created using elements from both Tearmoon's emblem — the crescent moon — and the Remno royal family's emblem — the wolf of war. In other words, knowing the emblems of all the nobility would make it possible to identify the familial make up of any individual noble.

Also, just to be clear, the example was just that — an example. It definitely did not mean that Mia would sometimes spend her free time doodling on the mirror in her room, dreamily mumbling things like, "Ahhh, if I marry Prince Abel, our emblem might look like this... The wolf howling at the moon... How poetic! We're a perfect match!" Implying anything of the sort would be nothing short of libel.

Equally slanderous would be the assumption that in the previous timeline, she'd doodle emblems combining Sunkland's sun and Tearmoon's moon as she dreamily mumbled things like, "Ahhh, if I marry Prince Sion, [et cetera]." Any mention of such possibilities was undoubtedly fake news!

"Hm, the right side of this emblem is Count Garlant's family. To the bottom left is one of Sunkland's eminent nobles, Marquess Wesley. As for the top right..."

When she'd finished identifying all the families in the emblem, the aging female teacher nodded with satisfaction.

"Correct. Very well done, Princess Mia. I see you've been doing your homework."

The teacher was known to be a stern sort, so such earnest praise from her was rare. Mia couldn't help but present her peers with a smug grin.

"Hmhmm, like I said, a piece of cake!"

Thus, Mia started off her new school term in tiptop form, which was a fact that should come as a surprise to pretty much anyone who had been paying attention to her grades. There was, of course, a good reason for her performance in class — Anne had worked her butt off to make it happen.

After being thoroughly traumatized by her experience in the library, Mia could no longer sleep by herself. Once Anne started sleeping together with her, things improved to the point where she

managed to fall asleep, but even then it took her a long time each night to do so. Seeing her mistress's nightly struggles, Anne came up with a plan to help.

"Milady, since you're having trouble falling asleep, why don't we do a bit of studying? We can go over everything you learned this year."

After obtaining consent, she proceeded to recite from the first year's learning materials in the soothing tone of a lullaby. She'd seen how badly Mia had struggled to pass her tests, so she slowly read through the passages line by line, hoping to jog Mia's memory and lessen the poor girl's academic burden in the future. To her great surprise, this proved brilliantly effective.

Every time she started reading, Mia would fall asleep within minutes. Whenever she looked up from her book, she'd find Mia snoozing peacefully in her bed. The strange thing, however, was that Mia somehow remembered everything she heard while she was asleep, leading to the birth of Anne's patented method of sleep-studying. Thanks to this incredible innovation, Mia could now behave in a fashion befitting her title of the Great Sage of the Empire. It was truly a miracle!

So, she beamed like the morning sun and basked in the admiring gazes of her fellow classmates.

Ahh, what a marvelous feeling. Finally, I've hit my stride. This *is how I should be.*

She was on cloud nine. More specifically, her head was, and when you have your head in the clouds, it's obvious what comes next...

Little did she know that by lunchtime, she would be reacquainted with the source of her debilitating trauma.

That day, Mia was having lunch in the courtyard with her usual entourage of girls. Having asked for some freshly-made sandwiches from the cafeteria, they were currently enjoying a little picnic under a clear blue sky and the tender warmth of the spring sun.

My, if this isn't the perfect day for a picnic. And the salted meat in this sandwich, mmm! Absolutely delicious! I'll just help myself to another one...

As she cheerfully bantered with her classmates and gobbled up what was clearly too many sandwiches to be entirely healthy, the end of her carefree mirth was slowly creeping up on her. Halfway

through lunch break, one of her entourage — Count Greilich's daughter, Dora — asked her a question.

"By the way, Princess Mia, have you heard?"

Mia glanced up as she reached for another sandwich.

"Hm? About what?"

Her fixation on the sandwiches blinded her to the ominous expression on Dora's face.

"Apparently... there was a sighting," the girl said in a whisper.

Mia gave her a blank look.

"A sighting? Of what?"

"Well, a sighting of..." said Dora, theatrically lowering her tone and drawing out her sentence. "A ghost, of course..."

"Huh?"

Paying no mind to Mia's open-mouthed shock, Dora proceeded to tell the story.

Chapter 6: Chloe, Tiona, and Mia's Syllogism

"A... gh-gh-ghost?" stammered Mia.

Dora nodded solemnly.

"I heard from one of my friends. Apparently, she was walking in the girls' dorm late at night, and she saw it..." She paused before opening her eyes wide and glancing up at Mia. "The ghost of a girl in rags!"

W-Would you quit it with the freaky expressions?!

Mia managed to keep the smile on her face as she suppressed a scream. Closer scrutiny would have revealed the twitches in her cheeks, but fortunately, none of the girls present were particularly observant.

"Rumor has it that it's either the ghost of a student who lost her love and took her own life, or a poor child who drowned in the lake."

As if on cue, the other girls followed up with a round of squeals and chatter.

"My, how scary!"

"I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep tonight!"

"We should start walking in groups at the dorm!"

One of the girls turned to Mia.

"What a dreadful story... Princess Mia, do you think ghosts really do exist?"

"Ghosts, you say... I think they make for a great story..." Mia put on a confident smile. "A younger me might have been scared, but unfortunately, I seem to have grown out of them."

Then she smoothly popped the last bite of her sandwich into her mouth before getting up and curtsying at her fellow classmates.

"In any case, I need to do some early preparations for my next class, so you'll have to excuse me."

With that, she hurried out of the courtyard.

As soon as she entered the school building she broke out into a run. By the time she reached the stairs, she was in a full speed dash. Her skirt fluttered wildly as she climbed up, taking the stairs two steps at a time. It was quite the spectacle for a girl of high birth to make of herself, but she simply couldn't care less at that moment.

She came to a skidding stop in front of a classroom, threw the door open, and yelled out the name before she'd even spotted the person.

"Chloe! Chloe!"

After a frantic scan of the room, she spotted Chloe staring at her in shock.

"Huh? Princess Mia? What's wrong?"

Chloe was in the process of preparing for the next class while Tiona sat at her side. The two girls had first met each other through Mia, and to her surprise, they'd become fast friends. Apparently, Chloe's expansive knowledge of plants was very useful to Tiona, who often helped out with the farm work at home. They seemed to have been in the midst of a pleasant conversation before Mia had brought everything to a screeching halt. It was perhaps a little rude, but Mia had no time for manners.

"Chloe, I have a question for you!" she exclaimed. "Do you think... ghosts are real?"

As a general rule, Mia did not believe in ghosts, and she considered it terribly childish to believe otherwise. She didn't think they were real... but her inner coward nevertheless ensured that they still scared her. Therefore, from time to time, she would need someone to assure her that ghosts were not, in fact, real.

Her experience in the library the other day had left her shaken, and she'd only managed to put it behind her by convincing herself that her eyes had been playing tricks on her. Still, she hadn't fully recovered from distressed-young-maiden mode, so she was particularly desperate for some reassurance.

She needed someone to tell her that ghosts aren't real. The problem was that not just anyone would fit the bill. Anne, for example, would gladly do so, but she might not mean it; there was always the possibility she would just be saying it to calm Mia down. She couldn't go to Abel or Sion either. The former would probably laugh and tell her she gets scared too easily... which, now that she thought about it, might actually be a great excuse to bury her face in his chest and—

No! No no no! Absolutely not! I-I can't possibly do something so immodest!

In the end, her sense of propriety prevented her from asking Abel for help. Sion, meanwhile, would just make fun of her for being a big baby, so he was definitely off the table.

Rafina was technically an option. She seemed like an expert on such matters... but that also had some spooky implications.

"Oh my, Mia, didn't you know? Ghosts are very much real. They're all around us. In fact, one of them is right behind you..."

Mia shuddered. If Rafina told her something like that, she'd be traumatized for life.

That left Chloe, who was both sufficiently trustworthy and likely to refute the existence of ghosts for her. Being a far more voracious reader than Mia herself, Chloe seemed like the kind of person who'd calmly, rationally explain to her why ghosts couldn't exist. So, with all her hopes resting on her dear book buddy, Mia had posed the critical question.

Chloe... didn't say anything. She didn't even laugh. Instead, she looked down at the ground, as though deep in thought. Light reflected off her glasses at an odd angle, obscuring her eyes. Her expression was unreadable... and more than a little eerie.

"Um, Princess Mia..." she finally said after a long silence. "I don't know much about ghosts, but..."

"But I can tell you that demoniacs definitely exist. They turn up all the time in our domain," said Tiona, answering in place of Chloe.

In general, it was said that demoniacs appeared more frequently in rural areas than cities. The Rudolvon Outcounty where Tiona lived was located far away from the imperial capital, so it made sense that she'd have more chances to run into those kinds of people.

"What do demoniacs have to do with ghosts?" asked Mia.

"Well, I just thought that if things you can't see like demons exist, then it can't be that much of a stretch to assume that ghosts exist too..."

Tiona's answer blindsided Mia; she hadn't considered that line of reasoning, and it was made all the more convincing by the fact that she had firsthand experience of an undoubtedly supernatural phenomenon. Ever since her mind-boggling leap through time, she'd been a believer. Not for any profound or philosophical reason,

mind you. She just figured that a miracle like that could only have been the work of God.

"The almighty God has bestowed something terribly special upon me. That makes me... the chosen one, in a way..." she mused in a profound moment of whatever the opposite of humility is.

Her inflated ego notwithstanding, the logic on display was sound. If God existed, then there was a very good chance that all the other things written in the Holy Book existed too. That is, the Archdaemon... and demoniacs... Terrifying entities like those could certainly be real, in which case it was entirely possible that ghosts were real as well. Thus concluded Mia's syllogism.

Which freaked her out.

Wh-Wh-Why in the moons would you say something that makes everything so much scarier?! Gah! This girl! I hate her guts and I take back everything good I ever said about her!

She fixed Tiona with a hostile glare. Meanwhile, Chloe proceeded to pour salt on her wounds by saying, "You know, I have a book on me you might want to take a look at..."

Mia almost screamed at the sudden sound of Chloe's soft but — given the atmosphere — creepy voice, only to watch aghast as she produced an even creepier book with a skeleton drawn on the cover.

"H-H-Hmm? Wh-What's that book about?"

Chloe let out a short giggle of enthusiasm as she flipped it open.

"Well, this, you see, is a book from an island in the far east. Its title translates to *Illustrated Compendium of Supernatural Creatures*, and it's basically a collection of artwork that depicts scary monsters," she explained as she showed Mia its contents.

Sprawled across its pages were pictures of... *things*. One of them had an unnervingly long neck. Another one had three eyes. Yet another was devouring a person whole. There were more, but she didn't make it that far. Her vision swam, and she slowly began to tip over.

"Your Highness! What's wrong?!"

Tiona leapt up in a panic and managed to get an arm around Mia before she fell all the way down.

"I-I'm all right. I just... feel a little dizzy, that's all. I'll be fine soon," she said with her face ghostly pale.

"You look awful. I think we'd better call Anne."

Feeling extremely unwell, Mia excused herself from her

afternoon classes and took a long nap in her room. When she finally recovered, it was already time for dinner. Since she'd missed her afternoon tea and its associated sweets, she decided to indulge herself a little, eating and drinking to her heart's content, woefully unaware that her gluttonous choice would soon lead to yet another tragedy.

Chapter 7: Summon the Madman's Courage to Defend the Honor of the Empire!

That night, when the sky was darkest and the moon hung low, Mia woke to an uncomfortable sensation that made her quiver in her bed. As the sleep slowly faded from her mind, she realized that she recognized this sensation. It was an old friend, and she knew it well. Its name was...

U-Ughhhh... I-I need to go...

...Urgency.

The sandwiches with which she'd gorged herself during lunch had been especially salty, which led to her chugging profuse amounts of water at dinnertime. Now, all that fluid she consumed was back with a vengeance. After some squirming, she turned onto her side and tightly pressed her eyes shut, figuring she'd just ignore the sensation and sleep through it. Soon, she reconsidered.

If I fall asleep like this, I have a feeling I'll end up regretting everything.

Yielding to the call of nature, she got to her feet and, using a faint beam of moonlight as a guide, felt her way across the dark room toward Anne's bed. She was going to ask her to go with her to the restroom, but seeing the restful look on her maid's sleeping face, she reconsidered.

Come to think of it, Anne barely got any sleep over spring break, and it was all because of me...

Throughout the break, Anne had been looking after Mia, who'd been scared silly by the glowing figure she saw in the library and had trouble falling asleep afterwards. Night after night, Anne would stay by her side, singing her soothing lullabies. When those weren't enough, her loyal maid would simply spend the rest of the night with her. The thought that she'd been a burden on Anne gave her pause as the soft, steady breathing of peaceful slumber entered her ears.

I can't afford to wear her out too much. What if she gets sick? That would be terrible.

Mia was a saintly leader who had deep regard for her subjects.

I-I'd have to sleep in this room all by myself! That would be unacceptable!

Scratch that. Mia was just being her usual Mia First self.

On a side note, Saint-Noel Academy's curfew was nine o'clock at night, but Mia, being an exemplary model of a healthy, wholesome child, always crawled into bed an hour early at eight. She'd usually lie there for about an hour before the "I can't sleep!" realization and ensuing panic came about — at more or less the same time as regular curfew. Then, she'd spend about thirty minutes being tormented by the horrors of her own imagination before finally drifting off to sleep. In other words, even at the peak of her insomnia troubles, she was falling asleep about half an hour after curfew. She was actually getting plenty of sleep. Furthermore, once Anne switched from lullabies to her patented sleep-study method, Mia would be out like a light within minutes of getting into bed.

As for Anne, she'd spend another hour continuing to read to the sleeping Mia before getting some rest herself. She'd be up at five the next morning, giving her about eight hours of sleep a night. Of course, everyone is a little different when it comes to sleep, but chances are... if Anne were to get sick, it probably wouldn't be due to sleep deprivation. Such calculations were a bit beyond Mia.

"Hnngh... I guess I have no choice."

She put on her slippers and left the room.

In the dead of night, the hallway of her dorm was... not at all shrouded in darkness. The walls were adorned with firefly azaleas, and their glow, though dim, was enough for her to walk around without a lamp. There was an almost otherworldly beauty to the hallway and its floral illumination. On any other occasion, Mia would have appreciated it. Right now, however, it just made everything very spooky. She couldn't help but feel that hiding in the irregular shadows around her were those things she'd seen in Chloe's book, all waiting to jump out at her as she passed by.

"M-Maybe I don't need to go after all... I can probably hold it in until the morning..."

She was about to turn around when she felt a gust of wind on

her back. The air of early spring was still chilly, and she shivered.

That was when she realized something — it was far too late to call it quits.

Ah... I see... I'm going to have to just suck it up and get myself to the restroom. Otherwise... I'll have an entirely different kind of trauma to deal with.

The thought of Anne hanging up her bedsheets to dry, stained patch and all, made her shiver again.

Nope nope nope! That's definitely not happening! All right, this is it, Mia Luna Tearmoon! It's time to summon the madman's courage and charge down this hall! she thought, trying to pump herself up for this immense undertaking. *I am the Princess of Tearmoon, and I function as its representative! My shame is the empire's shame! With the empire's reputation at risk of being sullied, what else am I to do but bear arms and fight to defend its honor?!*

With the tragic resolve of a lone knight riding into battle against uncountable foes, Mia faced the looming darkness in the hallway, and stepped forward. Fate, however, seemed to be toying with her, placing her destination — the restroom — in a location far from her room. It was technically an act of consideration by the school staff to ensure a princess's room wasn't next to a toilet, but right now, it sure felt like fate toying with her.

"Hnngh... Hnnnnnngh... It's so far... Why is it so far? And it's so dark too— Eek!"

Jumping at every flicker of a shadow and rustle from the wind, she made her way down the hall. The sheer stress of the experience probably shortened her lifespan by a few weeks, but she managed to reach the restroom.

A short while later...

"Phew..."

She came back out of the restroom and breathed a sigh of both physiological and psychological relief.

"In hindsight, it was a good thing I mustered up the courage to come here. Now, I can sleep comfortably..."

She trailed off as she looked up, feeling the fear come back to her as she realized she still had to make the return trip.

"...I have to do this all over again, don't I? B-But, I just have to go back now. I'll go quick and it'll be fine..."

Speaking to herself with considerably less panache than before,

she stepped toward the darkness again.

Chapter 8: Mia's Springtime Night of Ghost Stories

Mia had barely walked five steps before thirst began tickling her throat.

"There should be a water pitcher in my room, but..."

She was pretty sure Anne usually brought one in for her before she slept... but once Mia fell asleep, she stayed asleep. Never once had she woken up in the middle of the night and helped herself to some water. Consequently, the more she thought about it, the less sure she became about whether that pitcher was there overnight or if Anne brought it in early every morning.

As a matter of fact, Anne — bless her devoted soul — was actually bringing in a pitcher before she slept *and* changing it out for a new one every morning. Anyway...

"...If I go back to my room and find out there's no pitcher, I feel like I'll be too thirsty to fall asleep."

Being a bit of a worry wart, once Mia started worrying about something, it was hard for her to stop. Granted, gulping down more water right now would likely lead to another trip to the restroom later on, but for the time being, she wanted to quench her thirst.

It's not that far from here to the cafeteria. Maybe, instead of going back to my room right away...

The cafeteria always had a readily available supply of drinkable water that flowed in from a spring. Belluga was rich in water, and while it wasn't possible to furnish each room with its own supply, the Holy Principality's water infrastructure was, in general, highly developed.

After a moment's deliberation, Mia, her confidence bolstered by her successful trip to the restroom, set out toward the cafeteria.

...As though pulled toward it by some invisible force.

When Mia arrived at the entrance to the cafeteria...

"My? What's that sound?"

She focused, trying to make out what it was. It reminded her of sniffling. Or, perhaps, the sound a girl made when she was quietly sobbing by herself...

Suddenly, she remembered the story she'd heard during lunch break. It was about... the ghost of a female student who took her own life!

"N-No way... It can't be.."

She should have turned and ran. Instead, morbid curiosity got the better of her, and she squinted through the dim light in the direction of the sound.

"Eee—!"

She swallowed a squeal and froze. There, in the darkness, was a young girl who looked to be a little younger than Mia. The girl's hair was long and disheveled. She was dressed in rags, and her skin was mottled with dirt and grime. Her appearance was starkly at odds with her surroundings, resembling not a student of Saint-Noel, but a denizen of the slums. What caught Mia's eye more than anything, however, was how much of her was *red*.

There wasn't much light in the cafeteria, but it was more than enough for the sight to be seared into Mia's eyes. From head to torso, the girl was covered in a red liquid. It dripped off her, forming a pool on the ground, looking every bit like...

“Gyaaaaaaaah!”

Mia screamed. At least, she meant to. What came out of her throat was more of a high-pitched whimper.

Wh-What is *that?! I-Is it the bloody ghost of that student?! Eeeeeek!*

She stumbled out of the cafeteria in a panic and ran as fast as she could toward her room. Her slippers flew off her feet in her rush, but she could hardly be bothered to retrieve them. Her bare feet hit the ground hard with each step, trying to propel her forward at maximum speed, but progress still felt slow. The hallway seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance as if she were trapped in some sort of nightmare. Also, was it just her or...

Eeeeeek! S-S-Something’s chasing after me!

There it was! And again! The sound of footsteps behind her. They were fast. And they were getting closer. Mia broke out in a sobbing whimper as she desperately tried to outrun whatever was coming after her. She reached her room, scrambled through the door, and shrieked in a terrified voice, “Anne! Anne!” as she dove into her maid’s bed.

Only to realize it was empty.

“Anne?! Wh-What’s going— Where are you?”

Left to her own devices in an empty bed, her imagination quickly began to get the better of her.

What if, she thought, *everyone’s gone, and I’m alone in the world with that thing?*

She remembered a scene from her previous life, wherein her horror-loving classmate Dora had enthusiastically told a story to that effect.

Wh-What is the matter with me?! Of all the times to remember something like that, why now?! No way! That story isn’t real! Anne must have woken up and realized I wasn’t here, so she went looking for me! That’s all! There’s no way everyone would just disappear like that. That would be a nightma—

She froze, realizing she’d made a terrible mistake.

I... I forgot to lock the—

As if on cue, the door creaked open. Her heart let out a silent wail of terror.

Eeeeeek!

In a desperate attempt to survive the imminent encounter, Mia

sprung into action — by throwing her blanket over herself and shutting her eyes as tightly as she could.

I-It has to be Anne! I know it is! Anne's back! It couldn't be anyone else! It couldn't— Eek!

Something crawled onto the bed.

Th-That's strange. If it's Anne, she should at least say something!

Slightly, ever so slightly, Mia opened her eyes and peered nervously toward the foot of the bed... Only for the face of a young girl, streaks of red liquid trickling down her cheeks, to pop into view mere inches away from her own.

Gyaaaaaaaaa—

With that, Mia fainted dead away.

Chapter 9: Princess Mia… Deduces the Answer

Rustle rustle.

Something shook Mia's body. She groaned and rubbed her eyes.

What was… I was asleep? Ugh, I feel like I just had the worst nightmare ever…

Slowly, ever so slowly, she opened her eyes… Only for the face of the girl-shaped ghost to pop into view. It stared at her.

"Hnnngh—"

Again, Mia toppled over and fainted. Rather, she was about to, but…

"Um, could you stop pretending to be asleep?"

Eh? Did I just… hear a voice?

The hesitation in the voice aroused just enough curiosity in her to keep her conscious. Nervously, she opened her eyes a third time and studied the girl, who gazed up at her with a face that was mostly impassive save for a hint of apprehension.

Huh. This girl's no ghost, Mia realized.

It was common sense, she reasoned, that ghosts didn't show apprehension. Therefore, the girl before her couldn't be one. She then reached over and stroked the girl's head, feeling the viscous liquid stuck to her hair.

This red stuff…

On closer inspection, it was a little too red to be blood.

"Oh… I see. This is the sap used for writing on the whiteboard."

That made the girl crane her head sideways and give her a puzzled look.

"Um, I don't know what that is, but I tipped over the container that was holding it. But please don't worry. I made sure to clean it up properly," she said in a surprisingly polite tone.

"So that's what happened…"

Mia chewed her lip thoughtfully.

So, she's not a ghost after all. I mean, of course *I knew that. The*

whole time, in fact. Everyone knows ghosts don't actually exist... Which brings us to the question of... who in the moons is this girl supposed to be?

With her ragged appearance, she'd fit right in with the people of the Newmoon District. Her matted hair looked like it hadn't been brushed in a while. The abundant rips and holes in her dress made it look more like a cleaner's rag than an article of clothing, and the limbs protruding from it were unhealthily thin.

A starving child who snuck into the academy.

That was the impression she gave off.

"So, what exactly did you come here to do?"

"...I think you dropped this, so I came to give it back."

She held out the pair of slippers Mia had been wearing before she'd lost them in her desperate scramble.

"You came here just to bring me these?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, that's not all. I also want to ask you a favor."

A favor? Does she want something to eat? wondered Mia, only to be blindsided by her actual request.

"Could you keep the fact that I'm here a secret? Please don't tell anyone," she said before she promptly bent forward at the waist in a bow.

Mia regarded her.

Her request... and that bow... Mmhmhm, I know what you're playing at now.

After considering her options for a few seconds, Mia's mouth spread in a devious grin. At a glance, the girl looked in every way like one of the innocent townsfolk who could no longer bear the torment of poverty. In her desperation, she'd even managed to knock a container of whiteboard sap over onto herself, covering her in sticky red liquid. The effect was striking, making her look ever more pitiful... But no! This was all an act! Mia, in all her wisdom, had seen through the ploy!

Saint-Noel's security is hardly so lax as to allow random poor people to wander in...

Just getting onto the island was no small feat. On top of that, the security system deployed by Saint-Noel was so comprehensive that it made the academy something of a fortress.

In other words, this girl has what it takes to sneak past layers and

layers of security.

Furthermore, Mia had noticed something peculiar about her bow. It was decidedly masculine, not at all like how a girl would normally perform one.

In other words, there's a good chance she has experience pretending to be a little boy. The only reason she'd do that... is for a disguise.

What kind of person would need to go to such lengths to gain entrance into Saint-Noel? And actually succeed in doing so? She could only think of one possibility — the secret society plotting the destruction of the world.

Hah, nice try, but you can't fool me. I know who you really are. You're a Chaos Serpent!

In a moment of incredible insight, Mia engaged her logical faculties to deduce the answer! The wrong answer, based on incredibly flawed insight, but an answer nonetheless!

Mmhmhm, you sure didn't waste any time showing up. Too bad for you, because you're going to be sent straight to Rafina.

Mia, feeling rather proud of herself for ostensibly identifying an enemy agent, fixed the girl with a haughty glare.

Now that I know what the deal is with you, you don't scare me anymore. Though, come to think of it...

One insight led to another, and she realized that as young as this girl was, the fact that she managed to infiltrate the academy suggested she might not be a pushover. In that case, the best course of action for her, Mia realized, was to fight deception with deception. By playing along and pretending she'd been tricked, she could then trick them back. Her inner strategist was on a roll! Let's just hope she doesn't roll straight off a cliff!

"I know that terrible things will happen if people find out you've been letting me stay here in secret, but even so, please, please don't tell anyone," pleaded the girl.

"Ohoho, but of course," said Mia with a gentle smile. "I won't say a word about you. It'll be our little secret."

"...Really?"

The girl gave her a wide-eyed look of surprise.

"More importantly, aren't you hungry?"

Mia reached for a small box on her desk and opened it, revealing some cookies. Mia, you see, treated her room like a stronghold, which meant that she always ensured there were enough emergency rations (read: snacks) stocked to survive a three-

day siege (read: weekend of not leaving her room). And these weren't just regular cookies. They were the result of in-depth research Anne conducted at her behest, during which she compared all available cookies on a cost-to-tastiness scale and selected the best one. In other words, they were *optimal* cookies.

Hehehe, one bite of this on an empty stomach, and you won't be able to stop. I'll have you then.

The girl, however, shook her head.

"No thank you. I'm not hungry."

"Huh? But..."

"I mean it. I'm not hungry," she insisted, only to be betrayed by her stomach, which promptly let out a pitiful whimper.

"..."

Mia stared at the girl. To her surprise, the girl stared back, completely unfazed by the awkwardness of the situation. She even puffed out her chest a little in a show of confidence.

"I'm telling the truth, and to prove it, I'm willing to swear upon the name of my grandmother, whom I hold in the highest regard."

My, your grandmother's name isn't worth very much to you, is it?

Mia resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she held out a cookie.

"Here. Just take one. There's no need to be modest. I've got plenty more."

"But I was told that... Food is precious..." the girl said, her eyes clearly drawn to the cookie. "And I'm already causing a lot of trouble by asking you not to tell anyone about me..."

She stared at the cookie, spellbound. As a test, Mia moved her cookie-holding hand back and forth. The girl's head followed it.

"I... can't ask another favor... Not food..." she mumbled, her words trailing off as her stare grew ever more intense.

Mia tossed the cookie at her, and she immediately snatched it out of the air — with her teeth, no less. As she greedily chomped on it, tears filled her eyes.

"I-It's so good..." She said through sniffles before looking at her benefactor with wonder. "A-Are you some sort of goddess of compassion?"

Well, I see this girl's a real sucker.

Seeing that her foe had taken the bait, Mia put on her most disarming smile.

"I have plenty of cookies, so feel free to have as many as you'd like. I don't have anything else at the moment, but I'll ask them to

make some breakfast for you in the morning. Also…" she said as she gave the girl a once-over. "You need a bath."

She thought it best to present her apprehended Serpent to Rafina in a less grubby state.

Otherwise, Rafina might go easy on her by mistake. I mean, she looks so miserable right now that even I feel a little sorry for—

The door to her room opened.

"Ah, milady. Good. You're back."

Standing in the doorway was Anne, who breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Mia. Apparently, she'd gotten worried and gone out looking for her.

"Ah, Anne. Yes, I just went to the restroom. Good timing on your part though. Would you mind getting the bath ready?"

"I certainly don't mind, milady, but, um… Who might this be?"

Good question. What should I say?

Mia considered her options. While doing so, she glanced at the girl, only to find her looking bewilderedly back and forth between her and Anne.

"Huh? A-Anne? You mean… Mother Anne? If that's… and you just called her milady, then that means…"

"Uh… I'm sorry, but what's the matter now?" asked Mia, one eyebrow raised at the girl's sudden and perplexing reaction.

Chapter 10: A Moving Reunion Between Grandmother and Granddaughter

"What should we do, milady?" asked Anne.

"Hmm... For the time being, let's just bring her to the communal baths," instructed Mia, feeling a little uncomfortable with how the girl was gaping at them.

The communal baths in the girls' dormitory generally operated on a set schedule, but the hours they posted were more of a formality. Since the water was sourced from a hot spring, the baths were perpetually warm. Should the need arise, one could simply say a few nice words to the superintendent and be allowed to sneak in.

Once inside, faint beams of silver light would greet bathers through a section of stained glass in the ceiling, allowing them to bathe in a hot tub of natural water under the pale glow of the moon. It was all very atmospheric — and entirely irrelevant to Mia, who knew of no nighttime activity more pleasurable than being soundly asleep.

"First of all, these," said Mia with a grimace as she gestured to the girl's clothes, "need to be washed. Anne, could you prepare a change of clothes for her? Just give her something from my wardrobe for now."

"What about you, milady?"

"Huh? Me?"

She looked down at herself and realized she was soaked with sweat. This was hardly surprising, considering she'd just sprinted down the hallway for dear life.

Sleeping like this... is definitely a little gross.

With a nod, she hopped off the bed.

"Well then. I think I'll indulge in a bit of atmosphere as well. Bring my towel too, Anne."

Mia and Anne made their way to the baths. Following close

behind them was the girl, who didn't utter a single word the whole way.

I wonder what's the matter with her... Is she plotting against us?

Fearing sudden treachery, Mia kept shooting distrustful glances at the girl as they walked, but she spotted no signs of wrongdoing. The only emotion she could discern on her face was a hint of confusion.

As soon as they entered the changing room, Anne began undressing the girl. She allowed this without complaint and simply stood there as her clothes were removed.

Hm, no weapons as far as I can see... And she doesn't exactly look like a hand-to-hand combat specialist either, thought Mia as she discreetly observed the process. Disrobed, the girl looked more or less the same as her, except even skinnier. Her ribs were visible, harsh ridges down her chest, suggesting long starvation. Pallid skin and sinking cheeks punctuated a generally unhealthy complexion. Even her hair, now that Mia thought about it, felt rough to the touch. Despite suspecting the girl of being an accomplice of the Chaos Serpents masquerading as a slum dweller, when fully bared, she was a pitiful little thing, and Mia couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

It reminds me of my life in the dungeon.

She knew what it was like to have nothing to eat... and it was rough. In hindsight, labeling the girl a sucker for how she'd reacted to the cookie seemed a bit mean. Had Mia been the hungry one and somebody handed her some food, she would have called the person a goddess too... Or would she?

No, I still wouldn't go that far! This girl's definitely sort of a sucker.

"Milady..."

She was pulled out of her thoughts by Anne, who spoke in a serious tone.

"Do I have permission to use your shampoo and body cleanser? As well as your perfumed oil for moisturizing her skin?"

Helping Mia with her personal routines on a daily basis had made Anne somewhat of an expert on hair and skin care, and her professional pride demanded that she rise to the challenge of rectifying the girl's appalling appearance.

"You certainly do. I'm just going to wash off this night sweat, so don't mind me. Go help her clean up, would you?" said Mia before her lips parted in a toothy grin. "As a matter of fact, why stop

there? We came all the way here already, so you might as well go all out. I want to see her looking pretty enough to attend a ball."

With that, she left Anne to work her magic on the girl. In the meantime, she quickly rinsed herself off, immersed herself in the bath, and let out a deep sigh of pleasure.

Ahh... Now that's what I'm talking about... I needed this...

She stretched out her arms and legs in the warm water, feeling the heat relieve the soreness in her muscles. While she hadn't exactly engaged in any intense exercise, the brief sprint down the hallway proved quite taxing for a body as unaccustomed to physical exertion as hers.

Whoops. I can't be getting too relaxed here.

Sitting back up in the tub, she glanced toward the girl, who seemed to have completely surrendered herself to Anne's hygienic onslaught. Currently, she sat there with her eyes closed, swaying submissively to the motion of Anne's hands as she scrubbed the grime out of her hair. It was like watching an unusually docile kitten being bathed.

Who in the moons is she, I wonder...

At first, she'd suspected her of being some sort of saboteur sent here by the Chaos Serpents, but that suspicion was feeling sillier and sillier as the night went on.

And that whisper... What did she mean by that?

"She said Mother Anne, didn't she?"

Eventually, once the girl was filth-free, she joined Mia in the tub.

"All right. Should I bring some perfumed oil and a change of clothes for you, milady?"

"Certainly. Thank you, Anne."

Anne inclined her head and went off to retrieve the articles she'd mentioned. The girl watched her go until the door to the bathhouse closed behind her.

"It really is Mother Anne, but..." she murmured in a troubled tone. "Something's strange. It's her, but... younger..."

After mumbling to herself for a little while, the girl suddenly looked up and clapped her hands together.

"Oh! I know what's going on now. This is a dream."

In an impressive display of what might generously be called mental resilience, she proceeded to summarily categorize this whole bewildering situation as a dream, thereby removing the need to

worry about it any further. Something about the way she was behaving felt uncannily familiar to Mia.

Wh-What's with this girl? And why do I get the feeling we're related?

On closer examination, she did bear quite the resemblance to Mia as well. Her clean hair now bore the same argent luster, and her adorable blue eyes were similar in both color and shape, and were wide with wonder as they beheld Mia.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. Um... Nice to meet you. My name is Miabel Luna Tearmoon. People call me Bel, and I'm your granddaughter."

"...Eh?"

It took a while before Mia remembered how to pull her jaw back up.

Chapter 11: The Facade of the Great Sage of the Empire

"M-My granddaughter? Y-You mean, like, the daughter of my, my child?"

Dumbfounded, she could do little but stare as her brain struggled to parse the word's basic definition. The girl's physical similarities to her were undeniable, but even so...

Normally, such a claim would be ludicrous, but Mia had seen too much to write it off as complete nonsense. After all, for Bel to be her granddaughter, she would have needed to accomplish a feat unheard of in even the most fantastical of fairy tales — a backward leap through time. But backward leaps through time happened to be something Mia had firsthand experience with. This couldn't be a ploy by the Chaos Serpents either; if Bel was one of their agents, she wouldn't try to trick her with such an outlandish claim.

It seemed unthinkable — a reality stranger than fiction — but the sheer absurdity convinced Mia that Bel was telling the truth.

"Then that means... Miabel, are you..."

"Oh, please call me Bel, Grandmother," she said bashfully.

"Okay then. In that case, you can call me by my name as well."

"Okay, I will, Grandmother."

Something between a growl and a groan escaped Mia's throat. In the previous timeline, she'd lived for twenty years. Now, post-time leap, she had almost another three years under her belt. Her maturity level notwithstanding, she was technically a woman of twenty-two or twenty-three. But that wasn't nearly old enough for her to stomach someone calling her "Grandmother." Mother, she might have reluctantly accepted, but the "Grand" part was just too much; it hurt her on the inside. She got to her feet and strutted — more like waddled, actually, due to being half-submerged in water — over to Bel. Then, without a word, she grabbed her delicate shoulders and smiled somewhat menacingly.

"If anyone asks, Bel, I am your sister, and you will call me Miss

Mia."

"Huh? But, Grand—"

She leaned over Bel, bringing her face so close their noses almost touched.

"*Sister*. Do. You. Understand?"

"Huh? Huh? But— Ow! Ow! It hurts! Your fingers are digging into—"

"Let's practice, shall we? Repeat after me. *You are my sister, and I will call you Miss Mia.*"

"Y-You are my sister and... I-I will call you Miss Mia."

Bel's voice trembled with fear, but she managed to finish the sentence. Only then did Mia release her.

"Good. Anyway, moving on to more significant matters... Bel, would you happen to have gotten your head chopped off by a guillotine?"

"...Eh?" Bel blinked a few times at the abrupt question before giggling. "Ahaha, that's such a weird question. You say that as if you can be guillotined and then keep walking around after."

You sure can! thought Mia, though she was smart enough to keep her dissent internal. *Still, this tells me that being guillotined isn't a condition for leaping through time... Then again, now that I think about it, it's not even the same kind of time leap she experienced. Maybe this is something else entirely...*

Just then, a memory flashed across her mind.

A while back, I wished for some guidance. Something like the bloody diary...

She'd stared up at the library ceiling, hoping to find a lodestar to guide her way.

Could this — could she *— be it?*

She regarded Bel, whose smile had turned sad.

"But... Maybe it's not that weird. Maybe... you're right," she said wistfully.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"The truth is that I was on the run, and the last thing I remember is being seconds away from capture. I must have fallen unconscious right before it happened. That's why you might be right. When I wake up from this dream... I'll probably find myself on the guillotine." She cast her eyes down, and the bleakness of her words seemed to fill the ensuing silence. Then, she turned her face up and looked straight at Mia. "But... I'm glad that the last dream I

get to have is this one. It's such a fun, happy dream... and I always wanted to meet you, Gran— I mean, Miss Mia."

She smiled. It wasn't a particularly pretty smile; too much lip and not enough cheeks — the awkward first attempts of a child trying to learn an unfamiliar skill, endearing in its charm and heart-wrenching in its significance. The next thing she knew, Mia had her hands wrapped tightly around Bel's.

"It's okay, Bel." Mia gazed back in kind. "It's okay. This dream won't end. I, Mia Luna Tearmoon— No..."

She paused and gently shook her head. Then, with a soft smile, she said, "The grandmother you always respected... She won't let it."

To reassure Bel, Mia lifted her chin ever so slightly in a gesture of confidence.

"So tell me," she continued. "What happened? Why in the moons was a member of the imperial family on the run?"

Bel took a moment to gather herself. Then she stood up, determined to tell her tale.

"It's because..."

"Because?" Mia gulped as she waited on her next words, but before they came...

"Ah... My head..."

Suddenly, Bel's body swayed sharply to one side. From there, gravity took over, and she collapsed into the water.

"Wha— Bel? Oh my, the heat must have gotten to you."

Mia rushed over and lifted her out of the water.

"Oh, you silly little thing. What am I going to do with you," she said, holding the girl in her arms like an infant. "Let's get you out of here."

As she rose, it occurred to her that she'd been in the tub for longer than Bel. Considering Bel was currently incapacitated, that seemed to imply...

"M-My?"

Her head felt light, and the room seemed to spin.

"I-I feel a little dizzy..."

The next thing she knew, she was flat on the floor with her face pressed against its cool tiles.

"Ah... The floor... feels so good..."

A few minutes later, Anne would walk in on two bodies splayed

across the bathhouse floor, and it took every ounce of composure in her not to add a third one to the scene. The one silver lining of their disastrous bath trip was, perhaps, the fact that Bel — being the first to fall — had not borne witness to the inglorious sight of her half-conscious grandmother rubbing her heat-flushed cheek against the bathhouse floor. Her respect for Mia therefore remained unblemished, and the facade of the Great Sage of the Empire would live to fool another day.

All's well that ends well!

Chapter 12: Grandmother and Granddaughter Go Undercover (Literally)

What a peculiar dream... thought Bel, the pleasant heat of the bathwater permeating her fatigued body as she conversed with the girl before her.

She'd been seconds away from being caught by her pursuers when the light swallowed her. When she'd opened her eyes again, she was in a strange building, whose spacious chambers and stately interior resembled those of a castle. Bewildered by the sudden change in environment, her survival instincts had kicked in and she'd scrambled to find a place to hide. In the days that followed, she'd lived like a scavenger, staying out of sight during the day and cautiously venturing out at night.

Looking back... I wish I didn't spend so much time hiding. It was a bit of a waste...

Had she known it was all a dream, she would have walked around a little more. At the very least, she would have scrounged around for some more food; being hungry for so many days had been terribly unpleasant.

I might have met Mother Anne sooner that way too... And also...

She looked at the girl who'd introduced herself as Mia Luna Tearmoon. It was the name of her grandmother — a name that had commanded unwavering respect in life and wistful regret in death from everyone Bel had known. There was an undeniable resemblance in their features, but...

"The grandmother you always respected... She won't let it."

...Unlike Bel's, her voice was charged with a soft but steady confidence that manifested in the form of a gentle, reassuring smile. There was a quiet power in that smile that touched Bel's heart, and she felt herself inadvertently gravitating toward its enchanting pull.

Ahh... So this is... the Great Sage of the Empire...

Upon encountering Bel, she'd offered her cookies without a hint

of reluctance or aversion. When Bel had refused, she'd half-tricked her into eating them anyway. Then, as if food alone seemed to her an insufficient display of generosity, she'd even brought Bel here for a bath.

The grandmother I always respected... is everything I hoped she'd be. Warm... Kind... Dependable... I wish I could have met her earlier. That way, we would have had more time to talk...

At first, the dream had seemed a little scary. But now it had become a wonderful dream, and she was having so much fun. To her surprise, she felt happy — so happy that for the first time in a very, very long while, since the death of Anne and Elise, in fact, she found herself laughing. That was the day when fun had faded from her world. When she'd forgotten how to laugh.

Maybe it's because... I never let go of my pride in my name... Because I held onto it until the very end... And as a final reward, I'm allowed to have this beautiful dream...

A final reward...

Indeed, Bel was acutely aware that her fate was already sealed. Once captured, a girl of imperial blood like her would not be suffered to live. She'd meet a terrible end at the guillotine. Perhaps that would be mercy compared to what unthinkable horrors awaited her on her path to impending doom. The thought sent a dreadful chill through her, and she shuddered despite the heat.

If possible, I'd like to stay in this world for a little longer...

This was such a wonderful place, filled with warmth and kindness. The people she cherished were still alive, and they welcomed her with open arms. She wished with all her heart that she could remain here forever, in the embrace of a world where she was allowed to be happy. Sadly, fate seemed to have no ears for her desperate plea, and her view — along with all the joy and wonders of the world inhabiting it — started to blur.

Her dream was ending.

It was, she knew, the nature of dreams. Lovely as they were, they would end. No one could stay in a dream forever, no matter how much they wanted to.

Grandmother... I'm glad I got to meet you.

With that, her consciousness faded, and the world melted away into a white, steamy haze.

"Ah..."

When she woke up, Bel realized she'd been crying. She quickly rubbed the tears away from her eyes. The dream was over. What awaited her now was what little remained of her cold and brutal life. Having fallen into the hands of her captors, her situation was desperate. Hopeless, really. Resistance was clearly futile. But even so... She prepared herself to struggle. They weren't going to take her without a fight.

The bed she was lying on, however, couldn't care less how determined she was to oppose its soft, fluffy embrace. It exerted its hold on her unimpeded, downy craters cradling her body like fetters, robbing her of the ability to defy its—

She blinked her eyes open. Something about the string of metaphors that floated through her mind like some sort of metaphysical narration just didn't make any sense. She looked down her chest to find herself in clothes she neither recognized nor remembered putting on herself. They were of exquisite make and delightfully soft to the touch. A faint but pleasing aroma of flowers drifted from the fabric.

What... happened?

"Ah, good. You're awake."

A girl sat down at the foot of her bed and peered at her. The predawn moonlight streamed in through a window and danced off her argent hair.

"My, what seems to be the matter?" she asked as she leaned over and gently brushed away a tear from the corner of Bel's eye. "You're quite the crybaby, aren't you?"

Bel's lips quivered a little. Was that really *her*? It couldn't be. Was she seeing a ghost?

"G-Grandmoth—"

"*Miss Mia!* For the love of the moon, would you just call me Miss Mia already?!" protested her decidedly corporeal grandmother.

How rude! Here I am waiting for her to wake up, and when she finally does, that's *the first thing to come out of her mouth?*

With her arms crossed, she gave Bel a stern look before huffing out an exasperated breath and lying down on the bed beside her.

"Um, where's Mother Anne?"

"The cafeteria is going to start its morning preparations soon, so she went down to ask them to make an extra portion for you. It's still a little early to be up and about though, so we can get a bit

more rest here."

"Huh? Here? In the same bed with Gran— erm, you?" she asked with timid uncertainty as she shrank away. "I-I wouldn't dare do that..."

"Well, I can't exactly just make a bed appear out of thin air, can I? It'll take some time to get another one in here for you. I mean, I guess you can use Anne's in the meantime, but..."

Bel followed Mia's gaze and looked at the other bed in the room.

"Hm?" She frowned. "But weren't you sleeping in that one earlier?"

"...Nope. Definitely not."

For some reason, Mia didn't look at her when she said that.

"Anyway, enough about the beds already. I have some questions for you, but first..."

Mia proceeded to pull the blanket up over their heads, forming an intimate space where they could speak in private. Under the cover of, well, the cover, she snuggled closer to Bel and said, "All right, now we can talk. So tell me, Bel, what in the moons happened to you? I don't want to sound mean, but when I first found you, you didn't exactly look very... imperial."

From the rags she'd worn for clothes to her unkempt hair, left untrimmed for who knows how long, to her haggard appearance, none of it would befit even a girl of lesser nobility, never mind the imperial family. She'd looked like a downright street urchin.

"The Tearmoon Empire... and the imperial family... What happened to them? What happened to my children?"

Bel's answer came in the form of a long silence. Eventually, she said in a soft whisper, "There... is no Tearmoon Empire anymore."

Chapter 13: Princess Mia… Bungles It Good…

Mia's mind reeled at Bel's reply. She'd expected some bad news considering the state Bel had been found in, but it did little to lessen the impact.

"That can't be… But how? Did the famine do us in? Was it just too much to overcome in the end?"

"Famine? I don't know all the details, but it seemed to have turned out fine. That happened before I was born… Before my mother was born, even, so I don't really know much about it, but it was mentioned in the book that praised your accomplishments. The book said that you stocked up more than enough food to get through and even sent aid to neighboring kingdoms that were suffering."

"I see. I mean, I guess that should have been obvious, considering the famine is only a few years away. It wouldn't have anything to do with you…"

She began breathing out a sigh of relief, only for it to catch in her throat when she heard what Bel said next.

"Oh, and also, that was when they put up a big golden statue to honor you."

"Wh-What did you say? A… big golden statue?"

"Yes. Mother Elise said it was a towering statue that seemed almost to reach the heavens."

"R-Reach the heavens…"

Mia tried to imagine the sight of a massive statue of herself with its arms crossed and its face permanently set in a smug grin. The thought of such a monstrosity looming over the Grand Square of the imperial capital in all its garishly golden glory made her break out in goosebumps. But then, her imagination took a somber turn, and she envisioned the revolutionary army rushing into the square to pull it down. She could picture the scene with vivid detail.

And because it's made of gold, they wouldn't just take it down; they'd smash it up into pieces and sell them off. I mean, they're not literally taking me apart, but still, seeing something made in your image destroyed like that... it stays with you.

In the previous timeline, she'd seen what they did with her portraits. It wasn't the kind of thing that was easily forgotten. On their way back from a visit to a particularly destitute area, she and Ludwig had passed by the town square, where countless portraits of her had been set aflame. The sight hadn't angered her, nor had it caused her any overt grief. She only remembered feeling a quiet sadness as she watched her likeness reduced to smoldering cinders. To this day, her heart still ached a little at the memory.

"I definitely need to make sure that never gets built... I'd better have a word with Ludwig about keeping a closer eye on things..."

"Huh? How come? I heard that it was a very impressive statue of the finest workmanship."

"Here's something for you to remember, Bel. We of the imperial family must never think of taxes as money for us to spend," she declared with a stern look. "We should think of taxes... as our own flesh and blood!"

"Our own... flesh and blood?"

"Absolutely! That's the ultimate survival strategy!"

Bel nodded, diligently committing to memory a lesson that Mia herself had learned from that most profound of teachers — the guillotine.

"Getting back on topic though, what happened to the Empire?"

"I didn't see any of it happen myself, this is all stuff that I heard from Mr. Ludwig, but..."

After briefly qualifying her statements as second-hand, Bel began to tell her story.

"After my great-grandfather — your father — passed away, you didn't inherit the throne. It was supposed to pass to someone from the bloodlines of the Four Dukes."

The Four Dukes were direct relatives of the emperor, making their families part of the imperial lineage and therefore legitimate contenders for the throne. Greenmoon was on good terms with the imperial family due to Esmeralda being Mia's friend — in principle, at least. Bluemoon owned an abundance of capital. Redmoon had strong ties with the military. Yellowmoon lacked a prominent

feature but was nevertheless a renowned family. The four families varied in prestige and power but were all prominent nobility whose standing was second only to the emperor himself. It went without saying then that each had its own faction of allies within the aristocratic world, and all of them were engaged in a neverending power struggle.

"Oh no... You're not going to tell me the succession dispute got ugly and turned into a civil war, are you?"

"Wow, how did you know? That's exactly what happened. The Four Dukes started forging alliances with each other, and it ended up with one pair of Dukes against the other pair. A small number of the remaining nobility remained neutral, but almost everyone else joined one side or the other, and the empire was split in two."

Bel paused for a sad sigh before continuing.

"Mr. Ludwig spent a lot of time sighing like that. I kept hearing him say things like 'If only Her Highness had ascended the throne... Things wouldn't have gotten this bad,'" she said before quickly adding, "Oh, but he also said that you probably had your reasons for declining and did so after putting considerable thought into the decision."

Mia felt herself break into a cold sweat, which trickled uncomfortably down her back.

U-Uh oh... I think I know what happened here... That sounds exactly like the kind of decision I'd put zero thought into...

Mia was intimately familiar with how future Mia's mind worked. It was, after all, still her.

I-I'll bet it was because I read that history book. It said I'd have eight kids and the empire would last a long time and prosper...

One thing was clear to her: her future self almost certainly avoided becoming Empress out of sheer laziness. Whether it had been accomplished actively by outright refusal or passively by refraining from any actual effort to contend the decisions of others, she did not know, but either way, she definitely ceded the throne without putting much thought into it.

"Despite that," Bel continued, "when the civil war broke out and the empire was on the brink of ruin, Mr. Ludwig and his friends still got together and tried to make you empress, but..."

"But?"

"Just before they could, you were killed."

"Killed?!"

"By poison."

"*P-Poison?!*"

Mia almost leapt to her feet, but she caught herself at the last second.

W-Wait a minute, let me think about this... Poison... doesn't actually sound as bad as the guillotine, I think?

A couple of scenes flashed across her mind, all products of an imagination corrupted by fairy tales. She pictured the climactic ending of an epic tale, wherein star-crossed lovers — a princess and her knight — drink together from a poisoned grail, their love cut short in life but eternalized through death.

Well, that certainly sounds far more pleasant than having my head chopped off...

"It was a heroic end. You fought valiantly for thirty days against the poison..."

Mia's mind interpreted that as: *suffered from poison for thirty straight days*.

"And in your final moments, even as you lay upon sheets dyed crimson with your precious lifeblood, you let out a fierce cry, declaring that you lived your life to the fullest and died with no regrets."

Mia's mind interpreted that as: *bled out of every hole in her body and died a horrible, agonizing death.*

"That's what it said in the Princess Mia Chronicles."

Sweet moons high above! Nothing about that is even remotely better than the guillotine! Even factoring in Elise's tendency to take liberties, I pretty much just went through hell for a good month before dying in a pool of my own blood. That sounds downright horrific*!*

The description was so vivid that she couldn't help but shudder at the mental image she'd inadvertently produced.

In fact, parts of that story are so exaggerated they don't even make any sense!

Considering she was literally dying from poison, she simply couldn't picture herself letting out any kind of cry, nevermind a fierce one in conjunction with dramatic last words. Bel, meanwhile, was looking at her with the kind of wide-eyed awe usually reserved for deities and idols, and it was starting to make her a little nervous.

What in the moons have they been teaching her about me?

Curiosity yielded to dread, and she decided that she'd rather

not find out for the time being.

"After that, my uncles and aunts, worried about their safety, scattered and went into hiding. I was first taken to Outcount Rudolvon's place for my protection. But then my mother passed away. Just before she did, she placed me under the care of Mother Anne." Bel stopped to take a breath. When she spoke again, her voice was a little hoarse. "But then, they came, and... Mother Anne, in order to protect me, she... And after that, Mother Elise took care of me, but she too..."

Ahh... Anne, and Elise too... Even after I died, the two of you remained loyal until the very end, didn't you... Still, Elise, you need to stop making things up when you write about me.

A flurry of emotions rose up, and she huffed them out to compose herself. Then she asked another question.

"Okay, but even if I died, the empire shouldn't have fallen apart that easily. What about Sion? What was that busybody up to? Sure, he's not from Tearmoon, but I can't imagine he'd just stand by and watch from the sidelines while a bunch of idiot nobles ruin the nation for its people. Oh, and what about Miss Rafina? She couldn't possibly have just ignored the empire when it was in so much trouble."

"Miss Rafina? Do you mean the Empress Prelate, Rafina Orca Belluga?"

"Uh... Yes? I... think? Hm? Empress Prelate?"

Mia scratched her head. The term was unfamiliar to her.

Chapter 14: Rafina, Empress Prelate

Their talk continued well into the morning, and Mia stifled a yawn as she made her way to the cafeteria for breakfast. She'd left Bel in her room with instructions to wait for Anne, who should be bringing some breakfast back for her. After arriving at the cafeteria, she sat down at a table with her usual retinue and, after downing a mouthful of sweet milk fresh from the udder, promptly tuned out their chattering as she turned her mind to Bel's story.

Empress Prelate Rafina... What a tale that was. Even now, I still find it hard to believe.

The Holy Principality of Belluga was a small nation with no military. Rather, as the seat of the Central Orthodox Church, whose influence spanned the entire continent, its power was established upon a foundation of religious authority. Belluga had no king. Instead, it worshiped the one and only God as its lord and sovereign, making the Duke of Belluga — the highest ranking individual in the principality who was theoretically appointed by God — the functional head of both church and state. The absence of a military presence and refusal to claim the title of King was, therefore, an expected humility to offset the absolute power afforded the Duke. It was meant to be a check on the Duke's power...

And yet, Rafina still went and crowned herself Empress. Not only that, she raised her own army.

The conversation she'd had with Bel resurfaced in her mind.

"The Empress Prelate Rafina called for war against the heretical society of the Chaos Serpents," said Bel. "She militarized Belluga by recruiting volunteers from neighboring kingdoms and organizing them into the Holy Aquarian Army."

"Miss Rafina did that?"

Rafina certainly had made her intention to fight the Chaos Serpents clear. She'd even solicited the aid of Mia and the others. But that wasn't the same as raising her own army and heading off to war. The latter was something Mia hadn't expected.

“That’s not all. She also renamed the Holy Principality of Belluga, turning it into the Holy Belluga Empire, and started demanding allegiance from nearby kingdoms.”

“I-Isn’t that half a step away from outright invasion? What in the moons pushed her to do something like that?”

“She wished to establish a thorough and absolute system of control, the enforcement of which would prevent all further acts of sabotage. Employing the Holy Aquarian Army as her personal military, the Empress Prelate sought the complete eradication of all latent heretics hiding amongst the populace... is what Mr. Ludwig said.”

Mia grimaced at Bel’s lackluster impression of Ludwig. Fortunately, the real thing wasn’t here to witness it.

“The complete eradication of all heretics... The scale of that... and the violence involved. What a terribly disturbing thought. With Tearmoon in such turmoil, didn’t Sion from the Kingdom of Sunkland do anything?”

“Unfortunately, Sunkland was dealing with their own internal conflicts. There was a faction of nobles that wanted the kingdom to join the Empress Prelate’s cause, while the Libra King Sion and his allies were opposed to her methods.”

Even Sion, known for his unwavering commitment to good government and just rule, was faced with a fractured kingdom. Such was the weight of the Holy Lady’s words.

“The wave of division eventually washed over Tearmoon too. Out of the Four Dukes, two sided with the Empress Prelate, while the other two aligned themselves with King Sion. In the end, the faction that joined the Libra King lost. As a result, the empire fell under the control of the Holy Aquarian Army.”

“You know, based on what I’ve heard so far, it sort of sounds like this was all Rafina’s fault. I mean, all the problems seemed to have originated with her.”

Mia had figured the Chaos Serpents would be the source of all this strife, but that didn’t appear to be the case.

This is a total paradox. Rafina enforced a stricter system of control to get rid of the Chaos Serpents, but because she did that, the world ended up going downhill. That would make Rafina the ultimate source of all this chaos, and that just isn’t right.

Even now, she still found it hard to believe that Rafina was capable of all that.

“Why? Why did she do it?” asked an incredulous Mia.

“Because…”

“Because?”

“…I’m sorry. I think Mr. Ludwig might have said something about that at some point, but I’d dozed off.”

My, this girl’s got some guts to be dozing off in the middle of a lesson from Ludwig. She must have gotten an earful from him afterwards.

The sheer audacity of the act was remarkable, and she couldn’t help but be slightly impressed… until she heard what Bel said next.

“Ehehe, Mr. Ludwig’s always so nice to me, so I kept falling asleep…”

Mia stared agape at Bel.

“N-N-Nice to you? Ludwig? *Nice?*” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Yes. He treated me very well. It was my fault for falling asleep, but he would always apologize and say he must have taught in a boring way. He would always praise me, too. Sometimes, he’d pat me on the head and tell me I was a good girl just for staying awake and listening until the end of the lesson. He was my favorite teacher and I loved him very much.”

Wha— Hold on a minute, Ludwig! What is this discrepancy in attitude?! I won’t stand for this! It’s discrimination! I’ve been wronged by an egregious display of discrimination!

Of course, Mia had been somewhere between sixteen and seventeen when she was reprimanded for snoozing during lessons, whereas Bel had been about ten. That alone would warrant a difference in attitude, but such details were quickly incinerated by the flames of her dubiously righteous indignation.

By the time she’d finished her breakfast, the morning sun was well over the horizon.

I didn’t really get anything useful out of her after that. Maybe she’ll remember something else later though. That story about Rafina though… I wonder…

Coincidentally, just as she was prepared to leave the cafeteria, she spotted Rafina about to do the same.

“Good morning, Miss Rafina.”

“My, Mia. Good morning to you too. What’s the matter? You seem a little tired.”

Rafina gave her a gentle smile, which Mia intended to return in

kind, but with limited success due to a yawn she had to stifle.

"I'm... a little short on sleep today. More importantly, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. Might you have some time during lunch?"

"Why, how curious it is for you to say that. There just so happens to be something I'd like to discuss with you as well. I'll see you at lunch, then."

Whereas Rafina's expression brightened, Mia's turned into a puzzled frown.

Chapter 15: Rafina's Invitation

As soon as classes finished, Mia made a beeline for Rafina's room which, despite housing the daughter of the most powerful person in Belluga, was located in the same dormitory as Mia and the other girls. Rafina didn't live far from the academy, and it was perfectly possible for her to commute from home, but she saw the importance in having frequent discourse with the next generation of leaders from across the continent and chose to reside in the dormitory.

"Come on, we're going in," Mia said to her granddaughter, who was hiding behind her back.

Bel looked up at her with an expression stiff from nervousness.

"Um, Grand— I mean, Miss Mia, are you sure this is okay?"

"Well, that depends on you, doesn't it? As long as you don't slip up and call me 'grandmother,' I'm pretty sure it'll be okay."

"Hmmmph, you're such a meanie."

Mia pushed the pouting Bel out in front of her and knocked on the door.

"Excuse me, Miss Rafina."

"Ah, come in Mia." Rafina welcomed her with a smile before quirking an eyebrow at her companion. "My, who might this be?"

"She... is actually the reason I'm here today. May she come in with me?"

"Well, I certainly don't mind, but..." She frowned. "You've left me in a bit of a predicament. I only prepared enough teacakes for two."

"My! That certainly is a predicament!"

Genuine concern clouded Mia's expression.

Once they were inside and comfortably seated, Mia was profoundly relieved to find that Rafina managed to produce another portion of teacakes, which she set down on the table and offered to Bel together with a cup of black tea. Then she held her own cup to her nose and drew in a slow, savoring breath before addressing Mia.

“So, you were saying?”

“Well, you see... About that...”

Mia didn’t immediately answer. Instead, she put on a bit of a show, pausing to sip her tea as though she were reluctant to answer. The tea had a sweet, calming aroma of flowers, which was perfect for her purposes. Going with the flow, she let out a deep breath as it soothed her nerves.

“This girl, um... She’s actually my younger sister.”

With calculated hesitance, she gave the answer she’d prepared in advance, speaking in a tone that suggested she’d very much appreciate it if Rafina didn’t pry.

“Huh. Well now. I was under the impression Tearmoon only has one princess...” Rafina said with a frown.

Mia inclined her head in a conspiratorial nod.

“And you’d be right. Officially, I’m the emperor’s only child, so, you know...”

Unofficially, Mia was still the only child of the Emperor of Tearmoon, but anyway...

I’m sorry, Father, but I’m going to need your reputation to take a hit for me.

She trailed off, leaving the words unsaid but the intent obvious. Her wink-and-nod approach also had the effect of suggesting that the topic was awkward and she’d rather not talk about it. Fortunately for her — her story was so full of holes that it would fall apart at the slightest probe — the astute Rafina picked up on the cue immediately and spared her from further inquiry.

“Ah. Of course. Hardly surprising for the sovereign leader of an empire, I suppose. After all, if something were to happen to you, and you were his only heir... Goodness, the thought would keep him up every single night.” She nodded to herself in understanding before turning to Bel. “I see. So this is your sister. She does resemble you quite a bit, now that I’ve gotten a good look at her. And what’s your name?”

“Ah, I’m sorry for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Miabel Luna Tearmoon. I’m glad to make your acquaintance, Empres— Ow!”

Mia gave Bel’s foot a silencing stomp, covering up the ensuing yelp with a loud interjection of “Ohoho, isn’t she just the most adorable thing?” Then, she promptly changed the subject.

“Anyway, I’d like to ask you a favor, Miss Rafina. Would it be

possible…" she said, placing a hand on Bel's shoulder, a hint of nervousness entering her voice, "for her to enroll in this academy?"

Being a student of Saint-Noel Academy was a privilege in and of itself. There were plenty of people in the Tearmoon Empire with no shortage of money or status who couldn't gain admittance. Conversely, so long as Rafina deemed them worthy, it was entirely possible for backcountry nobles like Tiona or even commoners to attend. Mia was used to getting her way by throwing her imperial weight around, but even her metaphorical girth had its limits; this was not a problem she could solve by brute political force.

"So, you wish to enroll your sister here…" Rafina shot a quick glance at Bel. "Well, I can hardly turn down a request from a friend."

"Thank you very much, Miss Rafina."

Mia let out a relieved breath and inclined her head in a bow of gratitude. This amused Rafina, who giggled a little.

"Oh, Mia, I hope you're not auditioning for any stage plays today, because your acting thus far has been terrible."

"…Eh?"

"Honestly, Mia, do I really look like the kind of person who would pry? If you wished to keep your circumstances private, you could have just said so instead of talking in such a roundabout manner. Though, I suppose it's reflective of how much you care about her, which I find wonderfully endearing."

Rafina gave Bel another lookover and politely tipped her head at her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miabel."

"Ah, um, the pleasure's all mine, Miss Rafina. Oh, and please call me Bel."

There was still some lingering tension in Bel's voice, but her demeanor around Rafina was growing more relaxed. Seeing that the two had broken the ice, Mia figured that her work here was done. She reached for the teacakes.

"By the way, Mia, there's something I'd like to discuss with you as well. Do you still have some time?"

Seeing that Rafina wasn't done with her, she reluctantly retracted both her hand and gaze from the teacakes.

"Of course, I hope I can be of assistance. What would you like to discuss? Is it about… *them*?"

The only issue that seemed both important and relevant enough

right now was the Chaos Serpents, so it surprised her when Rafina brought up a completely unrelated topic.

"No, it's about something else. You see, the student council elections are coming up soon..." Slowly, Rafina looked up from her lap and straight into Mia's eyes. "And I'd like you to join as a member."

Chapter 16: Crossroads

“Huh? You want me to join the student council?”

Taken entirely by surprise, Mia barely remembered to bring her hand up to shield her open mouth.

Saint-Noel Academy’s student council was no mere exercise in student self-governance. Those enrolled here were the cream of the crop, handpicked for both their influence and potential. In a place with such a dense congregation of future leaders, being elected to the student council conferred both prestige and real, wieldable influence.

It goes without saying then that in the previous timeline, Mia had been gunning for a position in the council. The trouble was that only the president was determined by election. All the other roles, which consisted of an assistant to the president, two vice-presidents, two secretaries, and a treasurer, were appointed by the president. Mia, having soured her own image so thoroughly that Rafina refused to even acknowledge her presence, was obviously not selected for any of the roles. Her name was never even on the table.

Being Mia, however, she lacked the audacity to challenge Rafina for the president’s seat. So she ended up putting in a vote for Rafina and — in a pitifully oblivious fashion — spent the rest of the voting period wondering nervously if Rafina might tap her on the shoulder at some point and inquire about her interest in the student council. Needless to say, that never happened, and the appointments concluded with her watching unnoticed from the sidelines.

Having previously failed to secure a seat in the student council, one would expect Mia to be overjoyed that Rafina was now personally inviting her in. This was, in fact, not true. Instead, she’d rather have nothing to do with the student council. Mia was a changed woman. Gone was the naive girl whose innocent heart could still experience pure, unbridled joy, and whose simple mind yet revered unrivaled influence as a glorious thing. She was a grown-up now; twenty-odd years of life had taught her a few things.

Power and prestige, she now knew, were always accompanied by great responsibility. What would happen, for example, if she were to take Rafina up on her offer but neglect her ensuing duties?

Undoubtedly, she'd earn her displeasure. This Chaos Serpents thing, not to mention Bel, was already proving to be a handful. The last thing she needed was to risk creating a rift between her and Rafina. As such, she immediately started thinking of a way to politely decline the offer.

"But Miss Rafina, surely you haven't forgotten that I'm the Princess of Tearmoon?" she said, deciding to try the easy excuse first.

There existed an unspoken rule in the Saint-Noel student council prohibiting the appointment of nobility from Tearmoon, Sunkland, and their allied kingdoms to council positions. Due to the tremendous influence wielded by the student council, a great deal of maneuvering used to occur behind the scenes. Factions would form around candidates from powerful nations, leading to intense rivalries that often turned ugly. The skirmishing and sabotage that followed were terribly unproductive and eventually grew to the point of disrupting regular student life. In an effort to avoid repeating the failures of the past, an unspoken rule was born that forbade the appointment of students who had ties to the two nations from taking positions within the council. Rafina's invitation was in clear violation of that rule. But...

"I don't see any problem with that. As for the rule... Well, it's not in writing anywhere, is it? Besides, ideally, shouldn't a student council be open to every student of the academy? With you at my side, Mia, I feel that I can pursue that ideal." Rafina regarded her with eyes full of conviction. "I know you to be someone who sees people not for their standing or pedigree, but for who they really are. Am I wrong?"

Her words evoked memories of past encounters in Mia's mind.

That reminds me... She did tell me how happy she was to see me getting along with Anne, and after I became friends with Chloe and Tiona, she'd always smile at me when she saw me with them... Ugh, I appreciate the trust, Rafina, but I'm really not looking forward to the stress of trying to live up to it.

Just then, a soft whisper reached her ears.

"...Student council?"

The voice was weak, and it trembled a little. She looked toward

its source to find Bel, her hand frozen in midair above a teacake, and her face pale as she stared at Rafina.

What has gotten into you, Bel? Did we talk about something that—

In that moment, Mia suddenly remembered who Bel was. She was her granddaughter, yes, but before that...

My guide. That's right. She's my lodestar, sent here to guide my way.

She'd wished upon the stars, and Bel had appeared before her. Even if that was complete coincidence, considering Bel had knowledge of the future, anything that made her go pale was definitely no laughing matter.

I'd better consider my options carefully...

As a professional coward, Mia's pulse quickened immediately at the hint of danger in the air.

I have a feeling I'm at a crossroads, and something very bad will happen if I take the wrong path.

Trusting in her instincts, she said the first thing that came to mind.

"I'm honored... Yes, extremely honored that you'd consider me, but being a member of the council comes with serious responsibilities, and I worry about my ability to fulfill them. May I have some time to think it over?" she asked.

Rafina smiled.

"Of course. There's no rush, take your time." She took a sip of tea. Her smile remained, but it took on a more sober quality. "I must say though, for you to be so unmoved by the promise of power and prestige... It's really quite impressive."

"You flatter me with such remarks, Miss Rafina. I simply wish to avoid causing you trouble through my own inadequacy."

Copying Rafina, Mia reached for her cup and took a sip of tea. Only then did she realize how dry her mouth had become.

Chapter 17: A Night on a Tear-Soaked Pillow

Mia decided to have Bel stay with her and Anne in their room for the foreseeable future. The extra bed made the space feel a little cramped, but having already asked for special permission to enroll Bel, she could hardly demand an additional room as well. The arrangement also made it easier for her to talk to Bel, so she figured it was a decent compromise.

"Well? Let's hear it. What's the matter?" she asked as she sat down beside Bel on her bed.

The girl had been acting strangely since her talk with Rafina. Even now, her eyes were downcast, and her face remained pale. When she failed to respond, Mia didn't push her. Instead, she waited patiently for her to gather herself with the tender disposition of an old lady watching over her granddaughter. It was arguably the moment that awakened her inner grandmother. Eventually, after shooting Mia a few hesitant glances, Bel began to mumble her reply.

"I... remembered something."

"What did you remember?"

"Something Mr. Ludwig told me. He said that the watershed moment that sent the world tumbling toward chaos was this student council election. He was really sad when he talked about it, and he kept saying things like 'If only Her Highness had run in the election...'"

Mia listened until Bel stopped speaking, then let out a resigned sigh.

I don't know what exactly is going to happen, but it looks like I won't get to take the easy way out. Ugh, life is so much work...

Little did she know, the resignation she felt was actually the last vestiges of a blissful ignorance... because she'd completely misunderstood what Bel had said. Soon, the truth of her situation would dawn on her in all its terror, but for now, she could still give

Bel an unflustered nod.

"I see. If I'm being honest, I'd rather turn down the offer to join the student council, but if Ludwig said something like that, then I guess I have no choice. I'll go to Miss Rafina and tell her I officially accept her— Hm? What's wrong?"

She frowned when she noticed Bel shaking her head.

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean then?"

"Mr. Ludwig said that had you run in the election against the Empress Prelate Rafina and beaten her, the flow of history would surely have changed."

"...Eh?" Mia quirked her eyebrow so hard it tilted her whole head. "W-Wait... Wh-What do you mean? But... You just said... Huh?"

Feeling a sense of rising panic, she forced herself to calm down and mentally regurgitate Bel's prior words. One by one, she parsed them...

S-She's right! She did say I have to run in the election! B-But then... that means—

...Only to panic anyway when she realized the implications. Running in the election would be an open challenge. A declaration of war. Against whom? Why, the rival presidential candidate, of course — she who struck fear into the hearts of Mias everywhere, the Holy Lady, Rafina Orca Belluga! Traumatic memories of being blatantly ignored from the previous timeline resurfaced with a vengeance and she clutched at her chest as her stomach mounted a rebellion against the rest of her body. Filled with anxiety, she looked at Bel, her cheeks twitching from her forced smile.

"O-Ohoho, what in the moons are you talking about, you silly girl? Do you even understand what that would mean?"

Bel's reply was curt and cruel. She scratched her head and said, "Not really. I just know it's what Mr. Ludwig said."

Had it been just Bel's words, there might have been room for debate, but if they'd come out of Ludwig's mouth, then she had to give them serious consideration.

"B-But... you said you dozed off sometimes, right? Then, isn't it possible you misheard?"

"Is it?"

"It is!"

"Well, I have nothing but respect for you, so if you say so, then

I guess it is. I must have heard wrong."

"You must have. Oh, you silly little girl, Bel, always with the dozing off. Ohohoho."

They looked at each other and shared a laugh. Bel's laughter was genuine. Hers...

Augh! What am I doing? It's not like convincing her changes anything!

...Was more of an attempt to distract herself from an intense urge to scream. Though she'd questioned the accuracy of Bel's retelling, even as she did so, she'd known it to be a lost cause; Bel's guileless eyes bespoke the truth of her words. In other words, Ludwig really did believe that things would have changed for the better had she run against Rafina for president in the student council election and defeated her.

B-But, it's not like that stupid four-eyes can't make mistakes. Maybe his prediction was wrong. Yes, that has to be it. Old Ludwig must have gone senile and started spouting nonsense.

She drew in a deep breath to calm herself, blew it back out, and as her mind cleared, a single tear flowed down her cheek, leaving a glistening trail.

...Ahh, I get it now. This is it, isn't it? It's over. I have no choice left but to take the plunge.

She knew on an instinctual level that there was no way Ludwig could be wrong. If he'd said so, then that was it; unless she challenged Rafina in the election and won, terrible things were going to happen to everyone. Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, she couldn't help but shed a philosophical tear for the fleeting nature of agency in this life of hers. Then, she shed a few more for good measure, though these were less philosophical and more out of self-pity for how short said life might prove to be. The big arrow guiding her way was pointing straight off the cliff, and she was just going to have to dive right off.

There's no way out of this. I'm dead. I'm done for. Ohhhh, woeful moons...

She shambled to her bed, buried her teary face in her pillow... and proceeded to fall asleep that way.

For the record, Bel was profoundly alarmed by Mia's crying, but she quickly came to terms with the sight.

Why is she— Oh, when I told her about how Mr. Ludwig took really

good care of me, she must have been moved by his loyalty. And then, she probably thought of his final moments, and… she thought as she worked through the logic. *Grandmother is a sensitive person with a kind heart who understands the feelings of her subjects and can be moved by them!*

As a result, her respect for Mia only grew stronger.

Thus shone the lodestar girl, pointing Mia toward her path forward. It would, however, be another eight days before Mia made clear her intention to run in the election. In other words, for eight whole days, she engaged in furious procrastination, hoping against hope that another solution would present itself. Only after the struggle proved futile did she reluctantly pen the letter of candidacy and send it out.

The day her name appeared on the candidate list, Saint-Noel Academy was shaken to its core.

Chapter 18: Mia… Steps in Something

For eight straight days, Mia fought fate tooth and nail, doing everything she could to resist it.

The morning after hearing Bel's story, she told the school she felt unwell and requested time off from all her classes. Then she spent the rest of the day in bed drowning in tears of misery and despair. Thus concluded day one.

The next day, Abel and Sion, along with some of her other classmates, came to visit her and express their concern about her health. Feeling particularly adored, her ego had a field day, and her mood improved a little overall. Thus concluded day two.

"It's too early to be giving up! I need to calmly and carefully analyze Ludwig's words!"

The thought revived her motivation, and she started searching for another way out of her predicament. Thus concluded day three.

The ensuing day, she was seized by a craving for sweets, so she popped by the cafeteria, resuming her attendance of classes in the process for camouflage. Her brain, out of shape from the extended break, struggled with actually learning, and she retired to her bed early with wispy fumes of overexertion emanating from her head. Thus concluded the fourth day.

And that accounts for half of her eight-day-long battle.

The next evening, after almost five whole days of extreme unproductivity, Mia's little gray cells miraculously woke from their lifelong hibernation and put together a working theory. Behold, Mia's master plan!

If I beat Rafina in the student council election, history will change. The condition is: I must beat her. Clearly then, the important part is that Rafina doesn't become the student council president! In other words, it's not actually necessary for me to run in the election. As long as I can find a candidate who can beat her, things will work out fine!

Upon reaching that conclusion, it was as if a gale of clarity blew away the fog she was wandering through and revealed a path forward. She stepped eagerly onto that path.

On the sixth day, she promptly put her plan into action. When it came to saving her own skin, she would spare no effort. The candidate she had in mind was Prince Sion. Considering the amount of adoration and respect he enjoyed, she figured he could surely give Rafina a run for her money. This was surprisingly sensible for an idea of Mia origin. After her days-long rest, her brain was finally recharged enough for action. Once the final lecture of the day ended, she immediately made her way to Sion's classroom, humming cheerfully as she went.

Mmmhmhm, not only will I avoid receiving any death glares from Rafina, I'll also add a whole ton of work to Sion's plate. What a brilliant idea! Sweet moons, am I ever good at this!

Each grade in Saint-Noel was divided into two classes. Tiona and Chloe were in the same class as Mia, but Sion and Abel were in a different one.

Speaking of classes, I wish they'd put me in the same one as Abel. Sion too— not that I care about his feelings or anything! But I mean, if he really *wanted to be in my class, I guess I wouldn't mind if we were all together... After all, even he'd probably feel lonely if we left him in a class all by himself.*

Every once in a while, Mia's inner tsundere would rear her head.

"Excuse me," she said to a group of girls near the entrance to the classroom.

"Yes? Wha— Oh! Princess Mia!"

The girls jumped a little at the sudden appearance of a school celebrity. Mia smiled politely at them.

"Good afternoon. Would any of you happen to know where Sion is?"

"Huh? Oh, um, yes. Prince Sion, um, went to practice his swordsmanship."

"My, how diligent. I suppose I'll find him at the training grounds then?"

"Maybe? I'm not sure— Oh, but I saw Prince Abel with him," said another girl, who hastily appended this information about Abel in a whisper.

Mia lifted an eyebrow at her.

"Is that so? Abel was with him, you say... In that case, they might be at that other place instead..." she mumbled in contemplation. When she looked up, the girls were all staring at her

in wide-eyed shock. “Hm? Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

“...Really? Well, all right then. Thank you for your help.”

She showed them a polite curtsy and walked off.

After Mia left, the girls traded furtive glances.

“Hey, did you hear what she just said?”

“I totally did! She called him ‘Sion’! No ‘Prince’! Just ‘Sion’!”

“You think they’re, you know... together?”

“But wasn’t she cheering for Prince Abel during the swordsmanship tournament? She calls him ‘Abel,’ too.”

“Two princes! Which one is she going to go for?”

A round of squeals erupted from the girls, and their subsequent chatter would place Mia at the center of school gossip.

Oblivious of the rumors swirling around her, Mia strolled to the training ground and took a quick look around. As expected, they weren’t there. She then made her way to the stables, thinking they might be practicing their swordsmanship on horseback.

“Hm, still nowhere to be found.”

Just then, she heard a voice behind her.

“Hey, if it isn’t little Miss Tearmoon.”

She turned to find a tall figure standing over her with a horse brush in one hand. He gave her a wide grin.

“My, Malong. It’s been a while. How have you been?”

“Good, good. Have you done any riding over the break?” asked the leader of the horsemanship club, Lin Malong.

“I certainly have. So much, in fact, that I might be a better rider than you by now,” she answered with feigned seriousness.

That got a hearty laugh out of him.

“Gahaha. Confident, aren’t you? Wanna race me later then?”

“If it pleases you. I won’t lose though,” she said, matching his grin, before putting a finger to her chin and quizzically tilting her head. “By the way, would you happen to have seen Sion and Abel around here?”

“Nope. I’ve been here, tending to the horses since classes ended, so...”

“That leaves one more place then.” She nodded to herself. “Thank you very much, Malong. I’ll see you later then.”

“Sure. Oh, watch your step, little lady, ’cause that’s where—”

Squish.

"Eh?"

The unpleasant sound was accompanied by the viscerally repulsive sensation of something moist and mushy giving way underfoot.

What was— Oh no…

She *really* didn't want to look down, but she had to, and when she did…

"Ahh… Ahhhhh…"

She let out a grief-stricken groan.

My... My shoes... Ugh...

Mia was no dainty prude who knew nothing but a cloistered palace chamber. Having spent the last few years of her previous life in a dungeon, she was no stranger to filth. That experience was why she could walk through the slums without batting an eye. Therefore, she wasn't going to make a scene just because she stepped in... *stuff*. It wasn't like she'd hurt herself, and her shoes hadn't sustained any permanent damage either. All in all, it really wasn't that big of a deal. Still, the realization of what just happened came with an unpleasant shock that soured her mood. With her head hung, she sullenly left the stable and plodded down a small path behind the school. It wound its way forward like an animal trail in a forest. She kept following it in the knowledge that it led to the sandy beach where she'd once watched Abel practice his sword swings. Soon enough, her view opened up into a mesmerizing expanse of white sand and blue water.

"Ahh... This place is always so beautiful."

The sound of waves lapped gently at her ears, rolling fronts crashing against the shore before retreating to reveal wet sand glimmering under the soft springtime sun. Against this serene backdrop stood two princes, swords drawn and eyes locked.

"As I thought, there they are..." she muttered, her cheeks puffed out in displeasure.

I swear, Abel can be so dense sometimes. He really doesn't understand how girls think. I was hoping to make this our own little secret place. Just for the two of us.

She strode forward but paused midstep. With her foot raised, she looked from her shoe to the shore and frowned, imagining her brown-stained footprints dotting the pristine white sand.

"That... would be a rather unpleasant sight," she muttered. After a moment's consideration, she sheepishly took off her shoes. "There's nothing strange about this, right? It's a beach, after all."

Then she ran barefoot through the sand toward the two princes.

"Oh. Princess Mia."

The first to notice her was actually Keithwood, who stood with his back against a giant boulder near the shore as he watched over the two princes. Upon seeing Mia, he lifted an eyebrow and walked out of the boulder's shadow.

“My, Keithwood. Good day to you.”

She placed her hands on her skirt and greeted him with a polite curtsy.

Chapter 19: Princess Mia, Innocent Seductress of the White Sandy Beach!

Abel stepped forward and stomped his foot, throwing up a ring of sand.

"Haa!"

His sword split the air with a piercing woosh and slammed into Sion's upheld blade with a deafening clang. Keithwood sighed as he observed from the sidelines.

Prince Abel's getting better and better...

The last time they crossed blades, Sion's superiority had been obvious and overwhelming. Now the skill gap was much smaller; Abel was closing in on Sion. Mastering his signature downward slash seemed to have improved Abel's skill in all other aspects as well, fundamentally making him a far stronger swordsman. That being said...

"I doubt either of them are going to settle for 'good enough.' Not after Remno."

During the Remno incident, all of them had borne direct witness to the empire's finest, Dion Alaia, and his peerless swordplay. They all remembered his duel with the Adamantine Spear, during which he'd sliced through a thick steel pole and chuckled while doing so. Ever since then Sion had redoubled his efforts to improve his own skill with the sword. Abel had clearly been doing the same, and lately the two had been training partners, each striving to outdo the other and themselves.

"It's nice that they're so motivated, but come on. There is a time and place for this kind of thing, and it's definitely not on a sweltering beach under a blazing sun... Hm?"

A figure in the distance had caught his eye. He squinted. A girl was running toward them, her bare feet leaving dainty little prints in the pristine white sand.

My oh my, now there's a sight for sore eyes.

He stared transfixed for a second before snapping out of it with

a jerk of his head.

"Oh. Princess Mia."

"My, Keithwood. Good day to you."

She curtsied at him. When she looked back up, she wore a radiant smile that was every bit the equal of the glistening water and shimmering beach. It almost took his breath away, and he was forced to ponder.

Princess Mia... Is she doing this on purpose?

In that moment the sight of her really was that striking. The credit partly belonged to the backdrop; her appearance was simply a perfect fit for the lakeshore scenery. Her feet, delicate and bare, blended beautifully with the clean white sand. There was an innocence to her — like a blithe young girl sauntering along the shore or splashing around in the gentle tide — that tickled his paternal instincts, further accentuating her charm.

As a rule, princesses are supposed to avoid showing skin. Granted, her stunt at the ball was certainly effective, but taking off her shoes and walking around outside in her bare feet is another story entirely. This could easily be deemed unseemly behavior.

Commonly held notions of propriety, however, did not change the fact that she and the beach made an extremely picturesque pair.

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

She looked up at him with a pair of wide, quizzical eyes.

By the sun, it's a good thing I'm not into younger girls. Had I been Sion though, phew... Sensible as he is, he'd still probably reel from the sheer impact, he thought with a wince before replying.

"No. Just wondering what you're doing here of all places."

"Oh, there's something I want to speak to Sion about."

"With His Highness?"

"Yes. But, hmph, this is rather upsetting. I came all this way, and he's still not aware that I'm here," she said with a scowl at the pair of still-dueling princes. "Oh, I know what I'll do." Her scowl turned into a mischievous grin. "I'm going to sneak up and startle them."

Keithwood chewed on his lip.

Sacred sun high above... If she's doing this on purpose, then she's a devious little seductress. If not... Then, well, she's still a little seductress, and a natural one at that. Give her a few more years, and she'll be a force to be reckoned with.

He updated his mental profile of Mia, elevating her from

“seductress” to “natural-born seductress.” Little did he know, her choice to go barefoot was driven by neither design nor instinct, but something far less pleasant...

Mia skulked across the sandy beach. Both princes were focused on their practice duel and remained oblivious to her approach. Once she was close enough, she raised her voice and said, “You two sure like hitting each other with swords, don’t you?”

“Wha— Huh? Mia? When did you...”

Abel reacted first and spun toward her. In the span of a few seconds, his expression blossomed into a bright smile before quickly wilting into a red-faced grimace, which he promptly hid by looking away.

My, what’s the matter with him? wondered Mia as she, in accordance with Anne’s teachings, handed him a towel.

“After he finishes exercising, always hand him a nicely scented towel for him to mop his brow with.”

When it came to the things that truly mattered, Mia was a good student.

“Oh, uh, sorry— I mean, thanks.”

Abel took the towel with almost comical meekness and nervously patted his face down. Sion, meanwhile, watched them with a sideward glance before turning and walking toward Keithwood. There was a hint of loneliness to his slow stride.

“Sion.”

He turned to find Mia behind him, smiling as she held out a towel.

“You should dry yourself off too. You don’t want to catch a cold now, do you?”

While such a gesture might seem strangely considerate — thoughtfulness was not usually part of her diplomatic playbook when it came to dealing with Sion — there was a good reason for the sudden shift in attitude. Mia, you see, was here to ask him a favor, and she was not above a little sweet-talking and boot-licking to get her way. The way she saw it, beggars *could* be choosers, so long as they begged well enough.

“Oh. I suppose not. Thank you,” he said, somewhat taken aback, before recomposing himself and accepting the towel. “I’m surprised to see you here though. I didn’t think your idea of a fun afternoon was watching two sweaty lads take swings at each other

for a couple of hours."

"Ahaha, I wouldn't mind watching you two for a little longer, but that wasn't the original purpose of my visit."

"Oh? What was your original purpose then?"

"I came to ask you a favor."

"A favor? Of me?"

"That's right." She fixed him with a pointed gaze. "Sion, do you have any intention of running in the student council election?"

"Do I— What?!" he exclaimed, his voice cracking into a shrill falsetto in a rare display of genuine bewilderment.

Chapter 20: Princess Mia… Is Backed into a Corner

"For the love of the sun… Mia, you do realize the implications of what you're asking, right?" asked a startled Sion.

Beside him, an equally alarmed Keithwood narrowed his eyes at Mia, trying to decipher the intention behind her request.

"Are you telling me to challenge Miss Rafina for the president's seat?"

"Yes, but is it really that absurd a suggestion? There's no rule that states only a Belluga can be president, is there? It seems to me that everyone should have the right to run in the election."

Keithwood had to choke back a gasp at Mia's words.

Is she… I see. So Princess Mia takes issue with the current status quo of the presidential election being little more than a formality.

And as he worked through the logical implications of that conclusion, he had to choke back a second gasp; the epiphany he had felt like a bomb going off in his head.

Systems and institutions always existed for a reason. The student council elections of Saint-Noel Academy, likewise, were held for a reason, and a simple one at that. Schools, by their nature of gathering large numbers of young people in one spot, tended to be hotbeds of trouble. Incidents between students were headaches for any academic administration, but for Saint-Noel, whose student body consisted largely of young nobles and royalty, a mishandled dispute could turn into a full-blown international crisis with diplomatically disastrous consequences.

Arbitrating such issues was, therefore, an important duty of the student council president. Given this responsibility, it was crucial for potential candidates to possess one particular quality — widespread popularity. Only by leveraging an overwhelming amount of support from the students could a president hope to exert control over those who were born into power. The election was meant to be a means of demonstrating that popularity, but it had

been reduced to a formality. Rafina Orca Belluga would be the student council president. No one questioned that fact. Not even Keithwood's wise master.

The purpose of the election was to demonstrate to each and every student that, through their votes, they themselves were the ones who selected their student council president. That purpose needs to be reaffirmed, and it seems like Princess Mia thinks now is the time to do so.

Keithwood turned his thoughts toward the meeting during which Rafina had asked for solidarity in the fight against the secret society of Chaos Serpents. Faced with this unusual and difficult challenge, it was necessary for her to prove herself. She needed to demonstrate that she truly was someone who commanded the unequivocal support of her fellow students. In doing so, she would also place an onus upon her supporters; *they* chose her, and so, *they* had to take responsibility for their choice. By making her president, they were obligated to abide by her decrees. That, he figured, was the new status quo Mia was trying to establish.

If so, then she'd need to legitimize the election, and the only way to do so is for someone to run against Rafina. Someone who has an actual chance at winning. Which... explains why she's talking to Sion.

A weak candidate wouldn't do. The students had to be presented with a legitimate alternative to Rafina and *still* choose her over her opponent. Only then would the interplay of choice and responsibility come into effect. By investing their trust in her, the students lent credence to her role and weight to her words.

But what if her new contender ends up dethroning Rafina? I can only imagine that she already thought this through and decided she's willing to accept that eventuality so long as the election process is fair and authentic, but in that case... Why doesn't she just run herself?

He received his answer almost immediately.

"Don't worry, Sion. The task may seem daunting, but I have every confidence you'll rise to the challenge," she said, giving the prince a gentle, encouraging smile.

Mia had a plan. After procuring advice from the — Mia-styled, of course — preeminent romance expert of her time, Anne, who supposedly knew the male mind like the back of her hand, she'd devised a masterful plan to convince Sion to run in the election. It was, in fact, the same method she'd used to persuade Tiona's

brother.

Men love it when they're recognized for their talents. All I have to do is tell him he's got what it takes to be president, and he'll be all over it in no time!

"Don't worry, Sion. The task may seem daunting, but I have every confidence you'll rise to the challenge."

Put simply, she was going to butter him up. And she wasn't about to stop there. After all, she was asking him to challenge Rafina in public; it would take more than some metaphorical milk fat to move him to action. She was going to serve him a juicy "you can do it" burger sandwiched between two thick "I believe in you" buns. Today, Mia was going all out. She'd discarded her shame, turned the cheesiness up to eleven, and loaded the plate with the floweriest, most goosebumps-inducing collection of hyperbolic compliments she could think of. All that remained was to cram them down his throat.

I'm going to flatter you so hard you won't possibly be able to turn me down!

Just as she was about to begin her sycophantic offensive, however, Sion spoke.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," he said, his tone dead serious.

"Wha— Huh? But—"

"I know what you're trying to do, Mia."

H-He knows?! H-How?! Did he see through to the fact that I'm just trying to make him do all the hard work?!

The pores on the back of her neck — veteran responders by now — opened immediately and prepared to drench their surroundings in cold sweat, only to pause at Sion's next sentence.

"You're giving me a chance to make up for what happened in Remno, right?"

"...Hm?"

She gave him a quizzical look, wondering what the heck he was talking about, but he simply kept talking, paying her reaction no mind.

"You plan to impress upon the students the importance of a legitimate election, after which you'll hand me the important task of running against Miss Rafina as her opponent, and by doing so, allow me to redeem myself for my prior failings. It's an impressive plan. Honestly. The sheer craft is commendable. And I sincerely appreciate your consideration. But even I have something of an ego

to maintain."

He stepped past her, their faces parallel and opposite, and paused for one last remark.

"I have every intention of making up for my past failures, but I'll earn the chance myself. I can't allow my own redemption to be philanthropized, lest my dignity take leave of me for good."

Huh? Huh? What? What is he talking about?!

Then, he walked away, his billowing shirt adding a dash of dramatic flair to his stride. Mia stared at his retreating form with wide, bewildered eyes before turning toward Abel, her expression twisted into a silent plea for help. He gave her a wry smile and shook his head.

"What can I say? He's the proud prince of Sunkland, after all. He knows you mean well though, that much I'm sure of."

That's... not what I mean...

Nothing made sense. It was as if there was a separate conversation going on that she didn't understand. In her confusion, she failed to realize that her master plan had already been derailed... before slamming into a brick wall, bursting into flames, and then exploding in a spectacular show of fire and debris. There was no putting it back together, so she should have gotten out of there as soon as possible. Sadly, the necessity of making a swift retreat did not occur to her — a tactical error that cost her dearly, as the window of opportunity for escape quickly vanished.

"Another thing I'm sure of, Mia," continued Abel, "is that if you run in the election, I'll do everything I can to support you."

"...Eh?"

"As Miss Rafina's opponent, you'll probably have to deal with a lot of weird looks from people, but trust me when I say that I'll always be on your side. Win or lose, I'll be with you every step of the way."

"Ahh, Abel..."

There was conviction in his eyes as he took her hands in his, and she promptly lost herself in his earnest gaze.

Later, after returning to her room and spending the rest of her afternoon mumbling things like "Ahh, Abel... You're so wonderful..." to herself, the cool evening air began to pull her out of her reverie, forcing her to confront the cruel reality of her situation.

“Hnnngh... Hnnnnngh... How... How did it come to this...”

After realizing that she’d been backed into a corner with no way out, she went back to burying her face in tear-soaked pillows for another two nights before finally finding her resolve. News of Mia’s candidacy spread through the school like wildfire, and before long, the student council election began, setting into motion a whole host of plots, schemes, and conspiracies.

Chapter 21: The Princess with the High-Powered Gaze Returns

The morning after announcing her candidacy, Mia made her way to the dormitory cafeteria for breakfast. As soon as she walked in, she sensed a distinct change in the atmosphere.

"Good morning, everyone."

She greeted the students at her table. They were a familiar bunch — a group of girls from her class whom she saw frequently. Their replies, however, were muted and reluctant, delivered with nervous glances in her direction before quickly looking away. A period of silent, furious chewing followed, after which the girls promptly gathered their empty trays and left the table.

Ahh... This reminds me of my past life. When the revolution was about to start, it felt just like this.

There was tension in the air, as though everyone in the cafeteria was trying their hardest to distance themselves from her. It was subtle, but it was there. No one was openly hostile. The attempts to trip her as she walked past... The pouring of water over her head... There was none of that. The empire still commanded enough respect to ward off any overt harassment. Furthermore, she was pretty sure that at the end of the day, her fellow Tearmoon nobles would probably put their votes in for her.

With that said, they probably won't show any public support for me.

Nobody in their right mind would want to openly oppose someone with such overwhelming influence across the continent. Mia sure wouldn't.

Mia! Sure! Wouldn't!

Why in the moons is this happening to me?!

Mia was not one to go gentle into that good night. Hope of escaping her predicament was waning, but she still raged against the dying of the light. In her own head, at least; she didn't have the guts to make a public scene of it.

As it turned out, however, when it rains, it pours, and her

meeting with Sion and Abel at the beach fueled speculation of her intent. Rumors began to spread, whispered from student to student about how she was making shady bargains behind the scenes to secure a majority vote. Unbeknownst to her, she was quickly becoming a political untouchable.

In an attempt to minimize the chances of running into Rafina, she hastily finished her breakfast and returned to her room to get ready for class. Anne was absent, having accompanied Bel to her classroom. The emptiness of the room left Mia with a sudden yearning for her loyal maid's company, but there was nothing to be done about it.

What I actually wanted to do was find someone I could trust to go with Bel and keep Anne with me... but I don't know anyone like that...

She let out a sigh so deep she visibly withered a little in her chair. Then she got up to go to class. As she walked down the hall, she couldn't help but notice the glances people shot her as they passed by. Normally, a whole entourage of girls would already have flocked to her by now, but today, no one approached. Things remained the same when she stepped into the classroom. Hoping to find some reprieve in Chloe, whom she trusted to greet her normally despite the sudden shift in zeitgeist, she looked in the direction of her desk and was dismayed to find it empty.

Right, now I remember... Chloe always takes her time coming here in the morning.

Having finished breakfast early in an attempt to avoid stumbling into Rafina, she'd arrived early to class as well and was now left in the awkward situation of having nothing to do. She made her way to her desk, sat down, and quietly got ready for class. The sight of her alone, twiddling her thumbs in silence was an unusual one to behold.

Well, I guess this is how things will be. I don't blame anyone. I mean, if I were them, I'd stay the hell away from me too. Maybe I should go wait in Abel's room until classes start...

She entertained that thought for a moment but quickly stopped herself.

No, I shouldn't do that. In fact, this is fine. I should just stay like this. What's important right now is to avoid attracting attention.

When it came to opposing Rafina, the more she made a show of it, the worse off she'd end up. Even if she won, it'd be best to do so

quietly and with minimal fanfare. Ideally, her victory would be met with only mild interest. The goal wasn't "Whoa, she won? No way!" but "Huh, she won? Okay."

I bet most of you don't give a hoot about the election anyway, she thought as she studied her classmates. *I'll start by roping in nobles from Tearmoon and friendly kingdoms. Then... Sion's probably next. If I can get him to have a few private conversations with the Sunkland students, maybe I'll actually have a chance at getting over half the votes.*

In that case, it was imperative that she first secure the Tearmoon votes to solidify her base.

I'm pretty sure the families of the Four Dukes have some of their people enrolled here right now. I need them to promise me their support first... Hm? You know what? Now that I think about it, maybe this isn't as hopeless as I thought it would be.

As Mia contemplated how she was going to wheel and deal her way to victory, her ethically dubious thoughts were interrupted by a bright voice.

"Your Highness!"

A figure approached, her golden hair pulled smartly into a ponytail that glowed in the morning sun. She looked straight at Mia with sharp eyes full of conviction.

"My, Tiona. What's the matter?" asked Mia, her eyes wide and incredulous. She was slightly taken aback by Tiona's conspicuous entrance, but what surprised her more was the fact that she was being spoken to at all. Under the circumstances, she'd thought for sure Chloe was the first person who'd venture a greeting.

Tiona's voice bore the steady strength of resolve.

"I heard about what's going on from Prince Sion and Prince Abel."

"U-Um... You mean—"

"You have my full support in the student council election, Your Highness."

"...Eh?" uttered Mia, her mouth agape.

Tiona paid her shock no mind.

"And I'm ready to help. Let me know what I can do for you."

"Wha— Hold on a minute!"

Mia almost jumped to her feet in panic. She'd *just* decided she was going to ride out this election in the most inconspicuous way possible, and now... A glance around the classroom proved her fears right. Every pair of eyes was glued on the two of them.

Th-This is not *good! We're standing out like a pair of very sore thumbs right now!*

"D-Do you have any idea what you just said?" she asked as she gave Tiona a look that was meant to convey something along the lines of: *It's very scary to openly defy Rafina, you know? So just give me your vote and stay on the down low. I don't need you to make a scene.* She kept staring for a few more seconds, just to drive the point home. Mia was, after all, the princess with the high-powered gaze; she could speak through her eyes, no problem.

Tiona held her gaze throughout the extended period of ocular communication, then gave a firm nod.

Oh, thank the moons. She understands.

She let out a breath of relief, only for it to catch in her throat.

"Of course I do. And it doesn't matter. I'm going to help you, and that's that."

Gah! She didn't understand a damn thing!

As it turns out, the communicative abilities of her high-powered gaze still needed some fine-tuning.

Chapter 22: Led Forward By Pied Piper Mia

There wasn't a hint of apprehension to Tiona. The aura of hardheaded, forthright determination brimming from her took Mia back to a scene from the previous timeline.

That reminds me... This girl was once the saint of the revolutionary army, wasn't she...

The Tiona standing before her was considerably less endowed in holiness — and revolutionary-ness, for that matter — but at her core, she was still someone who, in a past life, had been willing to pick a fight with an entity as powerful as her own empire.

And her dad— Oh, sweet moons, her dad! He's one of those *people... Those strange people who like it when people hurt them...*

She shuddered as she recalled the time she'd made some unreasonable demands of Outcount Rudolvon, only to find that he was practically beaming at her. There wasn't a shred of doubt in her mind that Tiona's dad was some sort of pervert. Which was incredibly unfair to the old man, but unfortunately, he wasn't here to defend himself.

Her little brother Cyril is still cute, but the Rudolvons are just a strange bunch of people in general. I guess it's possible that she actually isn't bothered much by the thought of opposing Rafina.

Figuring she wasn't going to have much luck fighting Tiona's familial disposition, she decided to go with the flow. Either way, a modest amount of campaigning would be necessary, and it was true that she was going to need a couple of helpers. After giving Tiona another onceover, she closed her eyes and spoke in a breathy whisper.

"All right. If you insist, I suppose..."

She trailed off as she noticed the appearance of a few approaching figures behind Tiona.

"Your Highness..."

"My, you four are..."

There were two boys and two girls, and Mia recognized them.

You're the ones who locked Tiona in that room on the night of the ball... Oh, wait, I guess the official verdict was that your attendants were the guilty ones.

She lifted a questioning eyebrow at them. The frontmost boy proceeded to kneel before her.

"Your Highness, I am Uros, son of Baron Langess. You graced us all with your mercy and benevolence that day, and we have come to repay the debt. Let it be known that you have our full support as well."

Following his lead, the other three respectfully took a knee before her as well.

What? What in the moons is going on here?!

"We all remember how Your Highness spoke on our behalf and saved us from expulsion."

"Ever since that day, we have redoubled our efforts in our studies and committed ourselves to various volunteer works. We labored day and night in the hopes of regaining the trust of our peers, all so that one day, we could put that regained trust to use in service to Your Highness. We believe that day has come, and it would be our greatest honor to aid this endeavor of yours."

The four of them then lowered their heads toward Tiona.

"I'm sorry for what we did that day, Miss Tiona."

"We sincerely beg your forgiveness."

Their apology was met with a gentle smile.

"It's okay. Everyone makes mistakes. I don't hold it against any of you. Besides, we're all here to help Her Highness win, aren't we? That makes us brothers and sisters in arms."

Tiona had suffered their hostility, swallowed it wholesale, and still managed to smile. It was their compassion that defined a saint, and in that mentality of acceptance, Mia saw the makings of one.

Granted, Mia had a lot of compassion too; it was just all directed toward herself.

"Ohh... You are a paragon of beneficence, Miss Tiona. We are deeply grateful. In return, we shall do everything in our power to support Her Highness."

To her annoyance, a rather gratuitous scene of forgiveness and friendship played out around Mia, with her stuck in the middle. What she didn't realize, however, is the impact this short bit of theatre had on the rest of the room. Her usual retinue of girls, after

witnessing something like this, were certainly not going to stay quiet. They were, after all, the kind of people whose hobby was following Mia around and idolizing her. Moreover, the composition of this retinue was actually somewhat different from the previous timeline.

Having Anne as her personal maid-in-waiting imposed a prerequisite on those who sought to flock to her side — they had to be able to stomach Anne's position and presence. This functioned as a natural screening process, as it required candidates to be either sufficiently open-minded or so infatuated with Mia that they were willing to overlook everything else. Those who survived this incredibly selective process were, of course, a calculating bunch, but they also had to be people who were fundamentally drawn to Mia's character and liked her as a person. They were the Mia Elite. And as the Mia Elite, they sure weren't going to let the likes of Tiona or people who didn't even hang around her much hog the spotlight.

"Your Highness, you can count on our support as well!"

Their enthusiasm proved infectious. Soon, the whole class was flocking toward her to pledge their support, leaving Mia struggling to hold back the urge to scream in frustration.

Ahhh! Stop it! Would you please just go away already? This was supposed to be all unassuming and discreet! I need to keep a low profile... Or Rafina's going to start giving me the death glare!

“Milady...”

Anne’s steps quickened as she made her way down the hall. She was supposed to stay with Bel, but her concern got the better of her, and she decided to slip out of class to check on Mia. When she got to the door of the classroom, she found Chloe peeking in from the hallway.

“Miss Chloe?”

“Ah! Anne! Shh!”

Chloe put a finger to her lips and waved her over. She frowned as she walked toward the door.

“Trust me. Just watch,” said Chloe with a grin before turning back toward the classroom.

Anne peeked in as well, following the direction of Chloe’s gaze, and found that she couldn’t resist grinning as well.

“Milady...”

A number of students had gathered in a circle around Mia and were chanting their support for her. Mia, surrounded by their enthusiastic outpour, had her face buried in her hands. She seemed to be on the verge of tears.

“She didn’t let it show, but I guess she was nervous after all,” Chloe said in a sympathetic tone. “All this time, she must have been wondering if anyone would support her.”

Anne nodded quietly, her eyes still on Mia.

“Milady... I’m so happy for you...”

There were only a handful of students there, but it was a handful more than Mia had expected. Though their numbers were yet few, this moment undoubtedly marked the birth of the Mia Party. Small but bold, the fledgling faction nevertheless represented a formal challenge to the political goliath that was Rafina.

With her plan to keep her head down and stay out of sight falling apart in magnificent fashion thanks to the unforeseen addition of Tiona to her faction, Mia was at a loss. Little did she know, however, that it was this very event that would ultimately save her from an upcoming crisis.

Chapter 23: Princess Mia... Makes a Speech

The student council election was a large-scale event that took place over twenty days. Due to the perpetual absence of any candidates in the running aside from Rafina, a shortened version that finished in five days had become the norm, but this time, things were different. With the appearance of a foolhardy challenger in the form of Mia, the event reverted to its original format and length.

The beginning of the election was marked by an Opening Mass in the cathedral, which also allowed the candidates to introduce themselves. With the entire student body gathered in the cathedral, the Opening Mass was an extremely formal ceremony that observed the highest standards of ritual and custom, and the candidates, as the center of attention, were expected to present themselves in a fashion suitable for the occasion. Consequently, the clothes involved were of a fundamentally different make than usual. Candidates were required to don holy garments, whose chaste design functioned as a gesture of respect for the sacred service. The first piece of the ensemble was a thin veil made of a pure white material, which was to be worn over the head. In keeping with the theme of chastity, hair was to be kept loose. No ornaments — not even simple hairpins — were allowed. Next came the dress, which was a long white robe that hung from the shoulders down to the ankles. An equally white belt was then fastened around the waist, a small dolphin embroidered along its length served as the sole source of aesthetic variety.

Clothed in simple attire with all forms of ostentation strictly prohibited, the candidates sat directly in front of the priest presiding over the ceremony, where they faced all the students of the school. Having been born a princess, Mia was used to feeling the gazes of crowds on her, and she was fairly confident — perhaps too confident — in her own good looks. But even a seasoned being-

ogled veteran like her couldn't help but feel intimidated by the ceremony's austere air and stoic treatment of its candidates. Making things even worse, of course, was the presence of the other candidate beside her who, on any other occasion, would be the only person people paid any attention to.

"How strange. I feel as if it's been a long time since we've spoken, Mia."

Rafina smiled gently at her from the adjacent seat.

"H-How strange indeed. O-Ohoho. I guess we've both been busy..."

She replied in kind, except her smile was more nervous than gentle. The day she brought Bel to see her was, in fact, the last time they'd seen each other. She'd been avoiding Rafina like the plague ever since. She had no idea how a conversation between them would develop, and the thought of finding out terrified her to the point of dashing past corners and dodging behind bushes on a daily basis. Granted, if Rafina asked to see her, she was prepared to comply — ignoring a direct request would be going too far — but otherwise, she'd rather avoid having any interaction altogether.

Try as she might, however, she couldn't escape the inevitable coming of this day, and she could already feel the beginnings of a cold sweat at the thought that she'd have to keep sitting here beside Rafina for the next hour.

"I must say, Mia, I didn't expect you to join me on this altar. I was hoping you'd come work for me in the student council. I did want you to be the next president, you know? So I thought it would be a perfect chance for you to learn the workings of the council. That way, I could have helped you along..." she said as she looked down at her lap.

"Miss Rafina..."

Mia felt a pang of guilt at that saddened, downcast gaze, but Rafina's expression quickly reverted to a smile again.

"But this is plenty exciting for me as well. After all, the fact that you don't wish to work under me means you have other ambitions for the council, right?"

"...I do?"

"If you believe you can lead a council that surpasses my own, then I certainly welcome the attempt. It would ultimately be to everyone's benefit. Isn't that right, Mia?"

And that was when Mia realized... the smile on Rafina's face

reached only halfway; the humor in her lips was not shared by her gaze.

Eeeeek! R-Rafina! She's mad at me! She's really really mad at me!

Every fiber of her being trembled in terror.

"I'm looking forward to hearing your speech, Mia. I do wonder what campaign promises you intend to make."

Mia felt the blood draining from her face as if cowering from the smiling horror beside her.

The ceremony began with the lighting of the cathedral's candles and a reading of the Bible. Next, all the students rose to sing the sacred hymn before a passage of prayer was recited. All of this was done with everyone's gazes fixed squarely on the two candidates.

This... is pretty stressful. Even if Rafina wasn't sitting right beside me...

After all, it was very likely that the students currently saw her as an idiot who thought way too highly of herself and decided to pick an unwinnable fight against Rafina. Those gazes she felt, if not pitying, were probably vicarious embarrassment. The more she thought about it, the sorrier for herself she felt.

Ahh... Everyone's looking at me. I know they are. They're all secretly laughing at me for making a fool of myself. Ugh, this is terribly humiliating.

Objectively speaking, there certainly was no shortage of people who shared her deprecating opinion of herself. However, there were also plenty of people who found her an enchanting sight to behold. Her pure white clothes resembled a wedding dress, and there was an intrinsic appeal to young women in bridal gowns that amplified her charm. Furthermore, an entire summer break's worth of horse shampoo treatments had thoroughly invigorated the luster of her hair, and her skin was positively radiant, owing to Anne's diligent care. The thin veil then added a layer of translucent mystery, showing just enough of her natural beauty to tantalize the imaginations of her audience.

The human mind is a fanciful thing. In terms of raw, textbook beauty, Rafina had Mia beat hands down. It wasn't even a contest. However, whereas Rafina's frequent appearance in the various ceremonies throughout the school year afforded spectators ample opportunity to see her in holy garments, this was Mia's debut in the sacred white attire. Her rarity was off the charts! She was an SSR!

Naturally, the students' attention was drawn to the less familiar sight, and a roomful of eyes focused themselves on the veiled beauty before them. As the ceremony continued to progress, the time came at last for the climax — the election speeches.

"Now then, candidates, please swear your oaths before God."

Rafina rose and spoke her oaths in a resonant voice that carried throughout the cathedral. When she was finished, Mia stood up and looked out across the sea of students. Ranks upon ranks of eyes were focused on her, and she thought for a moment that she might pass out on the spot. Slowly, she cycled a breath to calm herself. Then, she spoke.

"I, Mia Luna Tearmoon, hereby announce my candidacy for the student council presidency and swear that I shall conduct myself in accordance with the principles of fair and honorable competipition —"

The silence after she fumbled the word was deafening.

"...Throughout the duration... of this election..."

She finished her sentence with a mortified grimace. For the record, the God of the Central Orthodox Church was a benevolent deity, so there was no official penalty for stuttering or pausing in the middle of a speech. There were, however, the countless pairs of eyes and ears that just wore witness to her flub, and she hadn't the nerve to look them in the face after that.

Hnnngh... I want to go home. Back to my room in the imperial capital... and sleep for a week.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but fortunately for her, no one could see them through her veil.

Chapter 24: A Tea Party for the Children of Tearmoon's Four Dukes

"Hahaha... It's here! My chance is finally here!"

Off in a corner of Saint-Noel Academy, a secret tea party was underway. It took place in a large room, in the middle of which was a correspondingly large table. Laid out on it were numerous plates all overflowing with sweets and pastries. Compared to the amount of food available, the number of attendees was oddly small — only two people were present.

What they lacked in number they made up for in clout. Were they in public, they'd turn the head of every passerby, with Tearmoon nobles going so far as to bow in respect. The reason for this deferential treatment was, of course, their pedigree; they were Etoilers — those of the renowned families of the Four Dukes, who were the leading figures of Tearmoon's central nobility.

"My, will Ruby be absent today? This was the perfect opportunity for us young Etoilers to deepen our ties. How selfish. And that new girl, Citrina. She's got some nerve, skipping our tea party..."

The daughter of Duke Greenmoon, Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon, brought her hand to her voluptuously wavy hair and threw it over her shoulder with an indignant hmph. Then she let out an even more indignant sigh before taking a most indig— Rather, surprisingly elegant sip of tea. Indignant as she was, she was still a Greenmoon; Greenmoons sipped their tea with grace.

"For the love of the moon, my dear Esmeralda. Did you hear what I just said? This is *not* the time to be quietly sipping tea."

The other participant, a young boy, leaned forward at her and scowled. His blue hair held its neatly-trimmed shape throughout the vigorous motion — evidence of meticulous and time-consuming grooming. Like Esmeralda, he was in his mid-teens.

She couldn't help but wrinkle her nose in disdain at his exasperating attitude. "Please, Sapphias, could you use your indoor

voice? We are, as you can see, *indoors*."

The eldest son of Duke Bluemoon, Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon, shook his head and sighed.

"Oh, Esmeralda, Esmeralda. What am I going to do with you? Don't you see the opportunity that just presented itself? We might be able to sit on the student council! Think of the prestige that would afford us! That ridiculous unspoken rule has always prevented us Tearmoon nobles from joining the council, but if Her Highness becomes the president, she'll surely dismiss that nonsense and appoint us as council staff," he said with bubbling enthusiasm before his expression sobered and he huffed out a quick sigh. "But to pick a fight directly with Miss Rafina by running in the election herself... Alas, our dear princess seems — pardon the language — to be a tad *inadequate* up here."

He tapped the side of his head. Esmeralda gave him an oblique look.

"Pardon the language indeed. Such insolence. You should know better than that, Sapphias. Etoiler though you may be, you should still refrain from speaking ill of Her Highness."

"Should I now? Then why do I recall a certain someone bad-mouthing Her Highness, saying she's too close with the peasantry? Hm, Esmeralda?"

"That wasn't 'bad-mouthing.' That was legitimate criticism. What you said was slander. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't confuse the two. Skipping my tea party to mingle with her maid's family at their home is absolutely unacceptable. Urging her to behave in a fashion befitting her royal pedigree is only right."

With the look of someone who believed very much that she'd just silenced all opposition through the undeniable truth of her words, Esmeralda took another haughty sip of her tea. Sapphias watched her for a few moments before shaking his head.

"Fair enough. I'll concede that you have a point. But you really should hear me out. At this rate, Her Highness is definitely going to lose."

"Goodness, Sapphias, would you kindly stop it with the insolence? Are you seriously contending that Her Highness, Princess of the great Tearmoon Empire, is going to lose to the daughter of a mere duke? And of such a tiny country, no less?"

"If we're going to talk about insolence, I'm pretty sure calling Belluga a 'tiny country' would make the list," muttered Sapphias.

“Look, the fact of the matter is that the way Her Highness is going about this reeks of incompetence, what with the commotion she caused in class. She should be keeping a low profile and making deals behind the scenes. Open opposition does her no favors. Her surest path to victory is one that evades the spotlight until the final, victorious moment, but she’s completely bungling her approach.”

He wore a sly smirk as he elaborated on his thoughts, which bore the characteristic underhandedness of minor baddies who lacked the panache of true villainy. By some unflattering miracle, it also happened to coincide perfectly with Mia’s original plan. In some ways, perhaps, they were birds of a feather.

“Alas, I seem to have no choice but to educate Her Highness myself. Not that I’d demand any recompense for my generous advice, of course, but when she does become president, it seems reasonable for me to remind her of my interest in the vice-president’s seat.” He glanced at Esmeralda. “What of you, my dear Esmeralda? Have you no thoughts of your own? I’d love to hear the intent of the Greenmoons on this matter.”

Esmeralda made an exaggerated show of bafflement, frowning as she cocked her head. “I have no interest in this student council business. Well, I suppose if Her Highness *insisted* that I participate, I’d consider a seat of my own,” she said with an indifferent shrug. Then she giggled. “I must say though, you sound just like my father. I’ll never understand why men are always so obsessed with positions and titles.”

She pressed a knife into the cake in front of her, cutting it into slices.

“Do obsess over it to your heart’s content then,” she continued. “I have no intention of helping, but I shan’t get in your way either.”

“Very well, in that case, I shall.”

Thus conversed the two would-be schemers, trading jabs and smirks of questionable conspiratorial value as they spoiled their palates with fine tea and quality sweets.

...Though it hardly seems necessary to mention, just to be clear, the Four Dukes were relatives of the imperial family. That is, they shared the same blood as Mia.

Make of that what you will.

Chapter 25: Princess Mia… Files a Complaint Against Her Future Self!

After school on the day following the Opening Mass, Mia made her way to the library, her face set in grim determination.

"Backdoor dealings or not, I still need to make it look like I have a campaign. For appearance's sake! Or Rafina is going to have my hide!"

The naivety of her prior outlook had dawned on her, and she now realized she was woefully underprepared. She did still intend to wheel and deal her way to victory, of course; she knew she had no chance of winning otherwise. However, without adequate camouflage it'd be painfully obvious that she'd employed dubious methods to secure her victory. She needed to manufacture a set of circumstances under which her victory would seem natural. Natural enough to satisfy Rafina, at least.

Satisfying Rafina though… Ugh, that's such a tall order…

She could feel her mood sinking with each passing second as she pondered this in isolation. The library was currently empty of students. Her comrades of the Mia Faction had gone off to plan their campaigning approach. In other words, they were doing the hard work of actually running a campaign.

The concept of elections was foreign to the Tearmoon Empire, so Mia was unfamiliar with the details. After consulting Chloe, she learned that in nations with elections, candidates frequently engaged in active promotion of themselves. They employed a variety of methods: some popularized their name and identity by distributing portraits of themselves, while others hired traveling bards to sing of their accomplishments. In Mia's case, it was too late to have portraits done, but they might still be able to write her name on pieces of parchment and hang them up in various locations throughout the school. Chloe had brought with her a number of ideas and was currently in the middle of a brainstorming session with her fellow campaigners.

If it was only Chloe, I might be a little worried, but she's also got Tiona with her, so maybe it'll be okay...

With so many young nobles around, Mia worried that Chloe might have trouble keeping them under control, but Tiona was also there. When tension was still thick in the air and public opinion was firmly against Mia, Tiona was the first to voice her support. Now, she was steadily becoming a respected figure within the Mia camp. Tiona's campaigning expertise was still to be determined, but Mia was reasonably confident that she wouldn't pull the kind of underhanded tricks that would draw Rafina's ire. Besides, she *did* speak up when everyone else kept silent — that alone deserved recognition. As a form of appreciation for her courage, Mia let her lead their campaigning efforts.

"She's good friends with Chloe too. Hopefully, they'll be able to handle their side of things... Ugh, there's so much to do. It makes my head hurt." She propped her chin in her palm and blew out a tired breath. "First things first, I need to figure out my campaign pledges. What am I going to do if I become president... I have to make sure that gets communicated clearly..."

She reflected on the advice Chloe had given her. Then, she started writing down what she wanted to accomplish as the student council president.

(1) Add more sweets to the cafeteria menu

(2) Increase the variety of jams that can be put into tea

(3) Mushroom stew (to be made by Mia) party in the winter

(4) Expansion of bath facilities (interested in steam baths, etc)

...And so on.

Soon, a pure and unfiltered list of Mia's personal desires took shape on the page. In other words, it was a waste of papyrus. As she continued to scribble, she heard a voice behind her.

"Excuse me, Miss Mia."

"Hm? Oh, Bel. And Anne! You're here!"

Mia's expression brightened at the appearance of cavalry. Bel notwithstanding, Anne, as her right hand and confidante, should be a great help.

"I heard you were here in the library, so I came as soon as I could. What can I do to help?"

"Thank you, Anne. I was just in need of your wisdom."

She promptly held up the page for them to read.

"This is...?"

“The things I want to do if I become the student council president,” Mia declared without a hint of shame.

Bel carefully studied the contents.

“These…”

She looked up at Mia, her expression incredulous.

“Sound amazing!” Her eyes glowed with wonder. “I knew it! You’re a genius! This cream-filled pie sounds amazing! I think it’s a great idea to have more sweets!”

Mia’s list was a big hit with Bel! The younger girl wiped away a trickle of drool with the back of her hand as she reviewed the list of items to be added to the cafeteria menu. In that moment, it was unmistakably clear that she was Mia’s granddaughter.

“Indeed. Thinking outside the box and letting ideas flow freely is important. It’s something Elise said often as well.” Anne seemed impressed, nodding appreciatively as she said this.

Seeing the positive reactions of her two helpers, Mia felt considerably more sure of herself.

“Hm! I can feel it! I’m on a roll! I need to keep thinking outside the box! Let’s see how far I can go with this!”

Her mind racing, she began setting pen to papyrus. Just before she raced right off a cliff, however, a new voice joined the conversation.

“Hey, Mia. I see you’re working hard.”

“My! Abel! Are you here to help me?”

“Yeah. I heard you were racking your brains in the library, so I figured I’d make myself useful and do some research as well. I looked into some things, what Miss Rafina did since she became president and stuff like that.” At that, he took on a more solemn tone. “There’s an old adage in Remno: ‘If you wish to win in battle, you need to know your enemy.’”

“I see. That’s true. Having some idea as to what kind of platform Miss Rafina will run on does seem important,” she replied before smiling at him. “Thank you. I’m glad I can depend on you, Abel.”

Technically, even if he’d brought no useful information, she’d still be glad that he came to see her, but anyway…

Mia’s smile caused Abel to look away in embarrassment, at which point he noticed Bel staring at him with wide, incredulous eyes.

“Hm? You… must be the young lady I’ve been hearing about.

Mia's relative, I believe?"

"Yes. Nice to meet you, Grand— erm, Prince Abel? My name is Miabel. Please call me Bel."

"Nice to meet you as well, Bel. Like you said, I am indeed Abel. Abel Remno, Prince of the Kingdom of Remno."

He regarded her with a gentle smile for a moment before breaking out into laughter.

"My, what's so amusing?"

"Oh, it's just that when you think about it, Miabel is a pretty funny name. I mean, it's what you get when you take our two names and mash them together."

It suddenly dawned on Mia that he was right.

Miabel = Mia + Abel.

That certainly was a valid way to interpret the name.

"Oh, Abel, you're so silly... Ohoho."

Mia's cheeks reddened slightly as she laughed.

Oh, how terribly silly of them. I can tell that they loved us very much, but even so, a name like that is just too straightforward. What in the moons was my child thinking, giving her a name like that? You need to put more thought into—

"Yes, it's the name my grandmother gave to me, and I love it very much. It means a lot to me."

Wh-Wh-What?! Augh! What in the moons was future me thinking?!

In her heart, she screamed in dismay.

Chapter 26: You Can Cry, Grandpa Abel...

"S-So, Abel, what did you find out from your research?" asked Mia after regaining her composure.

"Oh, right. Here, I figured it'd be easier if I wrote everything down," said Abel as he produced two pieces of paper and laid them on the desk. "This one lists everything Miss Rafina has done since becoming president, and this one..."

He paused for a second, scratching his head bashfully before continuing.

"This one's, uh... just some ideas for campaign pledges. Maybe they'll help you somehow. Or maybe not. I mean, I can't really see myself coming up with anything good, to be honest, but..."

"Why can't you? I certainly can. Besides, it was so nice of you just to do this!" she said, tenderly gathering Abel's pages in her hands.

"Uh, go ahead and start with Miss Rafina's page. You don't really have to bother with my ideas. They're a little embarrassing, now that I think about— Hm?"

Abel's eyes, which had been wandering from self-consciousness, stopped on the papyrus sitting on the desk. Curious, he picked it up and read through it. Then he looked at Mia, looked back at the papyrus, nodded to himself in comprehension, and turned to Bel.

"Bel, were you helping Mia with this?"

"Yes! It's a great honor to be able to help someone as esteemed as my grand— I mean, Miss Mia, so I'm trying hard to do a good job!" she answered energetically.

Abel gave her head a gentle pat.

Huh?! How come she *gets a pat on the head? That's not fair!*

Mia promptly became jealous of her own granddaughter. So much for the esteemed 'Miss Mia.'

And why are you even talking to Bel in the first place? I *came up with those pledges! That's* my *list!*

Her arms crossed, she stared at them in a huff until she decided to give Abel's research notes a read, at which point her indignation turned into horror.

"Wh-What are these... Bold reparations to aging school facilities... Abolish needless school events and plan new ones...?"

Written on the page were... *things*. Shocking things. Her discombobulated mind couldn't quite make out their meaning, but she knew that they were on a different level than the ideas she'd come up with. She read through them a few more times, growing steadily more anxious as she began to comprehend what she was seeing. The work described on the page painted a picture of a president who had been attentive to the needs of the student body, heeded their demands, and had the foresight to do meaningful work that would continue to benefit the academy decades into the future. Through an accurate understanding of the academy's condition, Rafina had devised solutions that were not only effective but simple enough for even Mia to understand...

A-Are you telling me I have to come up with ideas like these?!

Project MSC — More Sweets in the Cafeteria — was, in comparison, literal child's play.

S-So that's why he thought Bel was the one who came up with those ideas. I see... Also, is it just me or do Rafina's campaign pledges sound sort of... Ludwig-y? I can almost hear him saying stuff like this...

Mia had no idea how skilled Rafina was at politics, but if her administrative abilities came even close to matching Ludwig's, then this fight was already over.

Wh-What should I do? Nothing's coming to mind!

She wanted to hold her head and curl up into a ball, but before she could, another person entered the library.

"Ah, Mia. There you are."

"My... Sion?"

Sion held up his hand at them, the faint sheen on his forehead suggesting he'd run there. As he walked over, he gave Bel a curious look.

"Hm? You... Ah, I see. You must be the young lady I heard about from Miss Rafina. A relative of Mia's, I believe?"

"Yes! Nice to meet you. My name is Miabel, but please call me Bel."

"Well, you have lovely manners, young lady. I'm Sion Sol Sunkland."

Bel was visibly taken aback by his self-introduction.

"Th-The Libra King Sion... Wow! The real thing..."

"Libra... King?"

He gave her a quizzical look before glancing at the pages on the desk.

"Are these Miss Rafina's accomplishments while in office?"

"Yeah, pretty impressive list, isn't it?" said Abel with a helpless shrug. "She's not leaving us a whole lot of openings."

"I didn't think she would," said Sion as he skimmed through the other pages. "Oh? And what's this?"

"Ah!" Mia exclaimed with a start. "That's—"

Sion picked up the list of her campaign ideas before she could stop him. After reading it, he looked not in Mia's direction but, again, toward Bel, who stood there with an expression of innocent puzzlement.

"Were you helping Mia out with this?"

"Yes! I respect grand— I mean Miss Mia a lot, so I'm trying my best to help her."

"Ah. Good girl."

Sion patted Bel on the head with a gentle smile.

"Ehehe..."

She giggled with delight. It was the same exchange as before, but she seemed to enjoy it far more, savoring the moment with a big grin on her face. As it turns out, head pats were not made equal; getting one from a handsome celebrity like the Libra King meant a lot more to her than one from her own grandfather.

You can cry, Grandpa Abel. We feel your pain.

Well... She's quite the fangirl, isn't she? And one with terrible taste at that. But then again, she did cover for me with the campaign pledges...

Mia chewed on her lip, unsure whether she should feel glad or upset with the situation. Her pondering was interrupted by Sion, who asked, "But what about yours, Mia? Where are your campaign pledge ideas?"

What she really wanted to say was "You're holding them, damn it, so shut up and leave me alone!" But seeing as that wasn't realistic, she chose a moment's silence to consider her options. A few seconds later, she had a flash of inspiration.

"My, Sion. If you're so concerned, would you like to help me with them?"

Her plan: implicate Sion. That way, if something in her campaign ended up angering Rafina, she could claim that Sion had helped her come up with it and thereby lessen her own blame. Moreover, while no Ludwig, he was no slouch in the intellectual department; his smarts could definitely be put to good use. When push came to shove, Mia was willing to use every trick in the book, no matter how distasteful it might be.

"I'd love to, but alas, I've decided to maintain my position as a neutral party this time."

...And her plan fell apart immediately. His infuriatingly oblivious smile drew from her a bitter tsk.

You little... Fine, you got away this time. It was such a good plan, too...

While she grumbled under her breath, Sion shrugged.

"Nothing personal, but consider how it would look to others if I helped you. Surely you do not wish to paint this election as Sunkland and Tearmoon joining forces to overthrow Belluga."

"Then what did you come here to do?" she asked, her voice tinged with an edge of *if you're not going to help, then go away!*

"Ah, yes. I almost forgot." His expression sobered, and he shot Bel a cautious glance. "It's about the Serpents. Is she good?"

By Serpents, he of course meant the Chaos Serpents, a secret society plotting evil deeds, whose villainous members wore the camouflage of mundanity and blended into the faceless masses. So long as their identities remained unclear, it was difficult to tell who could be trusted, and discussion should be restricted to a limited set of ears.

Mia nodded.

"Bel's one of us. You can trust her."

If anything, she'd rather give Bel as much information as possible.

The Chaos Serpents are almost certainly behind the empire's future troubles, after all...

"Fair enough. Then we can talk about it right now. First, let me make clear that what I'm about to tell you is not definite information, so take it with a grain of salt... but it seems like the Chaos Serpents have agents in Tearmoon."

"Ah. I thought so."

Considering the Serpents blended into society, making it impossible to tell who they were, it made sense that they'd be in

Tearmoon as well. She'd expected to hear as much.

"And not just anywhere in Tearmoon. They're among the central nobility. Specifically, it seems like one of the Four Dukes is connected with them."

"Th-The Four Dukes?!"

That, she hadn't expected to hear.

Chapter 27: Suspicions Abound

"What are you talking about, Sion? You mean one of the Four Dukes is a Chaos Serpent?" she asked in a flustered voice.

The empire's Four Dukes were the nobles closest to the Emperor. They and their immediate family, collectively known as the Etoilers, were related to him by blood and were in line for the throne. That didn't make them automatically trustworthy, but considering their proximity to the Emperor, one should expect to be able to trust them more than the rest of the nobility. Any evidence to the contrary was a significant concern.

"How not-definite is that information?"

Sion frowned in thought before replying.

"Well, if we take this at face value, you'd expect the accuracy of this info to be somewhat questionable. Originally, it was Wind Crows dispatched to Tearmoon who dug this up, but they probably shelved it at the time because it didn't seem important. I mean, this is some pretty ancient intelligence we're talking about. How relevant can it possibly be if they let it gather dust for so long?"

"How relevant can it possibly be, huh..." echoed Abel. "Is it just me, Prince Sion, or do I hear a hint of sarcasm? You said its accuracy is questionable if we take it at face value. Is there another way of looking at it, then?"

Sion affirmed his suspicion with a nod.

"There are always multiple facets to such things. You can always look at them from a different perspective. One that is, like you suggested, a little less head-on." The corner of his lips turned up in a sly grin. "And it just so happens that I find the less obvious perspective more convincing. In other words, what if the intelligence was shelved not because it was deemed unimportant... but rather the reverse?"

"Aha. I see what you're getting at. The Chaos Serpents did infiltrate the Wind Crows, after all. If Jem or his accomplices were purposefully concealing information, then the lack of attention paid to this particular piece of intelligence seems far more suspicious."

“That... does seem very suspicious,” agreed Mia. “I think we need to find out more about this.”

If their suspicion was true, it would be a big problem. The suspects in question were the Four Dukes! They and their families supported the empire by rallying the rest of the nobility, and they were oathbound to stand with the imperial family to the bitter end... Or so Mia had thought... Then she remembered something from the previous timeline.

Hm? Wait a minute... Wasn’t I betrayed by Esmeralda last time?

Esmeralda, who frequently went around claiming to be Mia’s closest friend, had fled the empire as soon as the revolution began. It wasn’t just her, either; her whole family and all their retainers had hightailed it out of there. The Greenmoons owned sailing ships and had contact with foreign kingdoms overseas. By making use of their connections, they’d managed to escape the empire, which had been quickly becoming dangerous territory.

During their final meeting, Esmeralda had spoken to her with the same elegant smile she always wore.

“Miss Mia, why don’t we host a tea party here at the Greenmoon residence? We’ll make it a magnificent party and invite lots of guests. There, as proud Tearmoon nobles, we’ll declare our allegiance to the empire together and swear to serve it with all our heart and soul. Doesn’t that sound wonderful?”

Esmeralda’s words had been invigorating, and Mia took great comfort in them. Days of travel with Ludwig surveying the sorry state of the empire had taken a heavy toll on her psyche, and her good friend was a source of solace for her aching, despondent soul.

Then came the day of the tea party, when Mia had arrived at the Greenmoon residence to find it completely abandoned. This wouldn’t be the last of the betrayals she’d experience, but it was the first, and it had left her shaken to her core.

“Hnnnngh, and I was thinking I’d finally get to have some cake too...”

The fact that she’d been looking forward to eating some cake to reward herself for all her hard work made it that much worse.

Hm, now that I think about it, thought the current timeline Mia, *those Four Dukes and their people... pretty much all behaved the same way...*

She recalled the various times when she’d gone to them for help, only to run into a brick wall. Like when she’d asked one of

them to aid the people who were struggling with famine, only to be turned down... and when she'd requested one of them send troops to the capital to defend it, only to be ignored... Worse yet was the fact that their pedigree required someone of sufficient status to make the plea, so Mia often had to make the trip herself, suffering the equivalent experience of knocking on doors and being told to scram. Every such instance left a new scar in her heart. It got to the point where there were rumors that the Yellowmoons were actually assisting the revolutionary army in secret.

All things considered, it shouldn't even come as a surprise to me that there were traitors among them... In fact, I should consider myself lucky! This is an opportunity! I have a one-in-four chance of weeding out one of the Serpents. If I nab the guy and hand him over to Rafina, it might please her enough to let me off the hook if my campaign pledges don't turn out so great...

Feeling a little better about her situation, she looked at Sion, who shook his head.

"Unfortunately, too much time has passed. Finding out more is going to be a tall order."

"That's... not surprising, I suppose."

"Also, we lost contact with the person who fed us that information."

"What? Then..." she said, trailing off as her mouth slowly fell open.

"Presumably, the agent was silenced. Murdered. That's the most reasonable assumption," said Sion in a grave voice as he crossed his arms. "Anyway, we don't know anything for sure. Like I said in the beginning, the accuracy of this information is questionable. Still, some extra caution is probably advisable."

His words sounded like a distant rumble to Mia, whose thoughts had turned inward. In combining Sion's discovery with what Bel had told her, an entirely different picture had manifested in her mind.

The Four Dukes turn against each other as they vie for control of the empire. Bel said they split into two factions and civil war breaks out... but was it really just a power struggle?

Knowing what she knew, it was a question that came naturally. If one of the Dukes was harboring Chaos Serpents, a ploy by them would be a far more convincing explanation for the sudden fragmentation of the empire than a simple power struggle.

These Four Dukes... I'd better keep an eye on them...

And who would show up at her door the next day but the eldest son of Duke Bluemoon, Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon.

Chapter 28: An Invitation (Deathtrap) from the Scion of the Blue Moon

With the help of Abel's notes as reference, Mia managed to finish composing her campaign pledges in the library. Abel himself helped her of course, and she even managed to drag Sion in, eagerly extracting ideas from him as he grumbled things like, "I'm a neutral party. I'm not supposed to help you..."

His reluctant participation amused her, and she was glad to find that he seemed to have taken on a gentler disposition. Good humor, however, could only sustain her for so long. By the time they were done, she was ready to collapse. Had her brain been an engine, it'd be running on fumes — fumes which were visibly leaking out of her in the form of steam rising from her feverish head. Sion gave her an apologetic look.

"Sorry, Mia."

"...Eh? What now?"

She gave him a blank stare.

"Uh, about the Four Dukes. I can tell the news upset you so much you couldn't think straight. This whole time, I didn't see a hint of your usual brilliance. That was my mistake. I should have picked a better time to tell you."

The considerate tone of his message was undermined by its unfortunate logical implications. In effect, he just wrote off the entirety of Mia's brainwork — and she'd been firing on all cylinders, to boot!

What?! I-I worked so hard to come up with these too...

She would have given him the angry cheek puff, but she simply didn't have the energy for it. Furthermore, he *did* help her a lot with her pledges, so tolerance seemed the correct response. Mia, you see, was a responsible adult.

...Who stumbled to her room, face-planted onto her bed, and slept like a rock until the next morning. All from drafting one list of campaign pledges.

The following day, in the classroom they had turned into a makeshift headquarters, Mia and co were discussing the election strategy, when Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon arrived and requested an audience.

"Hello, Your Highness. A good day to you."

"Good day to you as well, Sapphias. Is your father doing well?"

"Quite well. Better than ever, in fact, by virtue of His Imperial Majesty's good graces. And good moons, Your Highness, you're looking beautiful as always. Time and again I find myself mesmerized by your charms."

"My, that sweet tongue of yours... Ohoho."

Unlike the gratingly superfluous greetings they exchanged, Mia's inner monologue was far less friendly.

So... You've come at last!

The second she heard Sapphias had requested an audience, she immediately made the connection with what she'd heard from Sion.

Chaos Serpents... If you think you can snare me with your schemes, then you'd better think again! I'm going to turn this around, catch you in the act, and walk you straight off to Rafina! She hmphed with swagger, insomuch as such a thing was possible. *The trapper... has become the trapped!*

"Now then, Your Highness... May I ask that the room be cleared?"

Sapphias glanced around the room. That alone was enough to send a few students scurrying for the door. As a scion of one of the Four Dukes, his influence easily overshadowed that of even royalty from smaller kingdoms.

"Mia."

Abel urged caution with a frown.

"It's fine, Abel. Could you see to it that our friends find another room to work in?"

She then inclined her head toward Tiona as well, who promptly withdrew with Abel. It pained her to part with the two sword-proficient members of her group, but under the circumstances, she had no choice. Sapphias, who wore a satisfied smile as he watched people file out of the room, suddenly looked past Mia and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, that's strange. Are you weak in the ears, girl? You've been instructed to leave."

Anne winced at his glare and began to shrink back, but Mia took a step forward, putting herself between them.

"She is my personal maid-in-waiting and therefore my arms and legs. She is a part of me. Would you cut my arms and legs from my body?"

She glared back, returning the favor.

"Not at all, Your Highness. Should it please you, I'll happily abide her presence."

He lowered his head in a respectful bow, to which Mia let out another cocky hmph.

Being alone with a member of the Chaos Serpents is far too dangerous! I'm not nearly stupid enough to allow that to happen!

"Milady..."

Anne, meanwhile, watched the ongoing exchange with tears of heartfelt emotion.

"Well, let's hear it then. What's the matter?" asked Mia.

"I'm here to inform Your Highness," answered Sapphias with a friendly smile, "that the Bluemoons offer you our full support during this election. We are at your service."

"My, what promising news this is. Did you come all this way just to tell me in person?"

"Not quite. I also bring a scheme, with which Your Highness may claim victory."

"...Really?"

Mia leaned forward a little. A way to win against Rafina was exactly what she was missing right now.

"Do you really have such a thing?"

"I do, and it's simple. Find Miss Rafina's shortcomings and hammer away at them."

"Her shortcomings, you say?"

In short, he proposed a method politely known as negative campaigning. Rather than highlighting the benefits of her own policies, Mia would find flaws in her opponent and use those as fodder for political attacks. It was doubtlessly an effective tactic, but...

"That's certainly doable against your average noble, but does Miss Rafina actually possess the kind of shortcomings required?"

"Who cares? If she doesn't, then we can just invent some."

"What?"

“Rafina Orca Belluga is a saint of most virtuous character. Because of that, even the slightest flaw will become a conspicuous stain on her reputation. All that’s required is a little behind the scenes preparation. Hardly a challenge. If it pleases you, Your Highness, I’ll be more than happy to take on this task personally,” Sapphias said with a cunning grin.

She stared at him and found herself…

S-Sweet moons! I hadn’t thought of that!

…Genuinely impressed by his idea!

For Mia, who’d been thoroughly intimidated by the flawlessness of Rafina’s policies, the realization that she could just *make up* flaws was a real eye-opener — a groundbreaking discovery of epiphanous proportions.

You know what? Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure I had this done to me tons of times during the revolution… Four out of every five rumors that said bad things about me weren’t true.

As a matter of fact, at least three out of every five had been factual criticism, but… well, that meant a good forty percent of the rumors were false, so she arguably still had a point.

What made those kinds of rumors especially pesky was that even when I personally proclaimed them false, lots of people wouldn’t believe me…

Personal experience made Sapphias’s logic seem all the more convincing, and she found herself on the verge of buying into his scheme. Something, however, held her back. Be it intuition or perception, alarms were sounding in her head.

It really gets on your nerves when someone does that to you, though.

In other words, showering someone with insults for something they never did is a great way to piss them off, and you can be sure they’ll hold a grudge for a long time.

I’m a pretty tolerant person, if I do say so myself, and even I got pretty angry. If I try a stunt like that on Rafina, she’s going to blow her top. And when she does…

Scenes of Rafina staring daggers of pure, unadulterated wrath at her as she cowered in terror filled her mind, followed by a vivid image of a very familiar path toward a very familiar head-chopping mechanism.

Eeeeek! Nope! Nope! No way am I trying something like that! I’ll end up on the guillotine so fast I won’t even know what hit me!

That’s right. This was no past-Mia. This was the Mia of the

present with a lifetime's worth of experience under her belt. A truncated lifetime, but a lifetime nonetheless. And present Mia knew very well that what one sows, one reaps. The seed that Sapphias was trying to sow would probably bloom into a gorgeous flower, but it would be a fleeting beauty, giving way to a bitter, poisonous fruit.

"A duke's daughter of a tiny nation like Belluga is nothing before the might of us proud Tearmoon nobles. We'll snap her like a twig, just you watch. Haha!"

She watched as Sapphias laughed with such smugness that he started bending over backwards, and that was when it hit her.

Aha! So that's it! I know what you Chaos Serpents are doing now. You're trying to drive a wedge between me and Rafina. Too bad for you, because I'm not going to let that happen!

Chapter 29: Fair and Square...

"Anyway, when you win the election, do remember to save me a seat on the student council."

Sapphias, unaware of Mia's realization, was still on his smug streak. She narrowed her eyes and hmphed at his brazen self-promotion.

"Just so you know..." She paused for dramatic effect and continued in a lowered voice. "You're not fooling anyone."

Her ominous delivery was meant to convey something to the effect of: *Those secret plans of yours? I see right through them.* Sapphias was taken aback at first, but he quickly recomposed himself.

"Haha, you're giving her far too much credit, Your Highness. Rafina Orca Belluga isn't nearly as formidable a person as you make her out to be," he said with a flippant smile.

His response happened to be exactly what Mia was expecting.

So that's your excuse. Well, I saw that coming from a mile away. You raise me up, and you pull Rafina down. By downplaying her clout, you assert that opposing her isn't a big deal. In essence, you're telling me that my suspicions are a misunderstanding, because why would you spend so much time plotting against someone who matters so little?

A stupider princess might have taken him at his word and felt really good about herself, believing that she really was possessed of more excellence than the Holy Lady Rafina.

But I'm not that stupid, so too bad for you!

Mia felt really good about herself, knowing that she'd seen clean through her opponent's scheme. Irony aside, she puffed out her chest and fixed him with a glare.

"I refuse to partake in this devious scheme of yours, Sapphias," she declared with supreme self-satisfaction.

You think you can get me to turn against Rafina? Think again!

"Y-You're refusing this brilliant plan of mine? You'll come to regret this!" he said incredulously before slinking out of the room.

She watched him go, basking in her triumph. Then, a thought

occurred to her.

Wait, underhanded tactics are a no-no, but I still have to ask people from the Four Dukes' families to buy votes for me. I'd better follow up on that tomorrow...

She would soon discover, however, that a series of rapid developments would throw her plans into complete disarray.

"That stupid little... coward of a princess! I'm practically handing her the win on a silver platter, and she has the nerve to say no?" muttered Sapphias as he brought his leg back to kick the hallway wall... but then thought better of it. The wall looked very solid, and he didn't want to hurt his foot.

"Just so you know... You're not fooling anyone*."*

Mia's words echoed in his mind.

"I'm not fooling her? No way..."

Wait for it...

"My plan is perfect. How can she possibly know?"

Wait for it...

"How can Rafina possibly be on to me?"

And there's the kicker.

"She thinks way too highly of Rafina. This isn't caution anymore. This is spinelessness. And so what if it's a devious scheme? Everyone knows that all's fair in love and war. I'm just doing what it takes to win."

He grumbled all the way down the hall until a voice stopped him.

"Excuse me, Lord Sapphias?"

He turned reflexively in its direction, to find a girl.

"Hmm? Ah... You're the daughter of that pauper noble in the outlands. Who gave you permission to speak to me, hm? Has all that special treatment you've been getting from Her Highness gone to your head?"

The sight of Tiona Rudolvon vexed him, and he snapped at her, focusing all his lingering frustrations into a venom that coated his glare and his words. She tensed and took a step back, but then gathered herself, tightened her fists, and looked up to meet his gaze.

"Please refrain from doing anything that would get in Her Highness's way." Her voice trembled, but she continued. "She's... not like you people. She hates dirty tricks."

He stared at her for a few seconds as though he didn't understand what the words meant. When he finally realized that he'd just been lectured by a girl lesser than him in both age and status, his lips twisted into a disdainful grin.

"So, you were eavesdropping. How fitting. A base act from a base person."

"Yes, I'm from the outlands. And yes, my family isn't rich. But Her Highness is the kind of person who doesn't discriminate by the circumstances of one's birth."

Her response turned his grin into a grimace.

"You've got a big mouth for a lowly noble. I think I'd better teach you a lesson..."

He intended to step forward and intimidate her, but his foot had barely left the ground when he heard a second voice.

"All right, let's leave the lessons to the teachers, shall we?" said Abel, who appeared behind Tiona. "Also, personally, I wouldn't go around threatening young ladies like that. Not good for the image."

"Abel Remno, huh. The second prince of a second-rate kingdom. What makes you think you can talk to me like that? I am an *Etoiler*." Sapphias looked down his nose at Abel.

"Well, a confrontation with you is probably diplomatically inadvisable, considering Remno isn't *exactly* Tearmoon's equal..." Abel said with a wry shrug. "But if I didn't speak up here, I'd get an earful from that princess of your illustrious empire. So I'd appreciate it if you could refrain from any acts of violence toward ladies."

Completely unfazed by Sapphias's flaunting of imperial power, he wore a quiet smile. It was the kind of smile that warned his opponent against testing his patience.

His opponent, meanwhile, was very much fazed. As a blood relative of Mia, Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon shared her value system. Specifically, he wasn't a fan of things that hurt. Even more specifically, he couldn't stand seeing the universal symbol of pain — blood. In fact, the very sight of it could cause him to faint. Tripping and scraping his knee was likely enough to make him feel light-headed; he knew from experience. As such, even when he disciplined his servants, the most he'd ever give was a good slap across the face. And even that he tried to do as little as possible, because his hand would hurt afterwards. In theory, he could let his subordinates carry out the physical punishment, but that carried the

risk of them failing to moderate their strength. If they split a lip or caused a nosebleed, he might pass out on the spot.

Due to this reason, Sapphias was a boy with a strong aversion to violence. It goes without saying that he'd never participated in the swordsmanship tournament, nor had he ever trained for it. Even Tiona was probably better than him with a sword. Strip away the political component, and he wouldn't have much left in terms of power.

Meanwhile, Abel was royalty. Second-rate royalty from a kingdom inferior to Tearmoon, but still royalty. Furthermore, Princess Mia was fond of him. A verbal spat might go unnoticed, but in the case of a major confrontation, Sapphias would be on the back foot. He quickly analyzed the current scenario in his head, and...

"H-Hmph, don't get too full of yourself. We Bluemoons are no pushovers. Plenty of the empire's nobles are on our side. I'm going to talk to the rest of the Etoilers too, so you can forget about getting any help from them!"

"Well... Go ahead, then! Even without their help, Her Highness will be fine. She'll beat Miss Rafina fair and square!" said Tiona, growing more confident as she spoke. "She'll be fine. I know she will."

News of this exchange wouldn't reach Mia until the following morning, just before she was about to head out and start asking the Etoilers to buy votes for her.

G-Gaaaah! What is with this girl? Is she trying to spite me or something? Ugh, I can't stand her! She's definitely my archnemesis!

Frustrated as she was, Abel's presence prevented her from throwing a tantrum. Moreover, he'd taken Tiona's side, leaving her with little choice but to play along.

"I-I see... Th-Thank you. Y-You really gave him a piece of my mind there, didn't you? That's... definitely what I would have said."

"I'm honored by your approval, Your Highness."

I don't approve, damn it! I definitely don't approve of what you did!

As a result, Mia lost what was supposed to be a guaranteed bloc of votes from the Tearmoon nobles. What would come from Tiona's display of courage, however, was yet unknown to her.

Chapter 30: Sapphias is Summoned

"Damn it! Who do they think they are, talking to me like that? Damn it, damn it, damn it!" screamed Sapphias in a fit of rage after returning to his room, punctuating his curses by punching the pillow on his bed. His furious barrage echoed in the form of a series of dull *foomphs*. After a time, the futility of this exercise overcame his anger, and he deflated with a long sigh.

"I... need to get into the student council. I can't afford to screw this up..." he said through gritted teeth.

His expression was marked with the tense grimace of someone who was running out of options. He glanced at the desk beside him, on which lay a letter of a few lines which read...

My Dear Honey,
Are you keeping well?
I'm still in good health as usual. I don't get to see you though, and that is a frequent source of sadness for me.

It was the beginnings of a love letter — and a very mushy one at that! Sapphias, you see, had a fiancee who'd been betrothed to him since they were children. Arranged marriages were not uncommon in the politically cutthroat landscape of nobility. They were an important method through which families would deepen ties with each other and acquire power. Pedigree, wealth, military strength... Such factors and more were all part of the complex calculus of competing self-interests that formed that basis of noble marriages, many of which involved unwilling participants. In Sapphias's case... against all odds, he and his wife-to-be actually shared mutual affection for each other. They shared so much affection, in fact, that it spilled over into everything they did together. They'd flirt in their letters. They'd flirt on their dates. They'd flirt when visiting each other at home. They flirted so much that it started wearing on their families who, in an attempt to stay sane, actively avoided being in the same room as them.

The girl was the daughter of a Marquis. Though not quite as esteemed as the Four Dukes, her family's pedigree was more than adequate for her to be a suitable bride. She was a fair young maiden who thought of Sapphias as a respectable and upstanding young man. The validity of her opinion was perhaps somewhat suspect, but their mutual malfunctions nevertheless gave birth to what was doubtlessly an ideal couple among high-ranking nobility. They also happened to bear more than just a passing resemblance to Mia in how their brains tended to get stuck in romance mode, but they'd never admit it.

Of course, there was nothing wrong with any of that. The problem was that Sapphias had written a letter to his sweetheart boasting about how he'd be in the student council.

"Am I supposed to tell her that I spoke too soon and didn't make it in? Never! The shame! The shame alone would be too much!"

He held his head and wailed in dismay. It was a wail that came from deep within the heart of a man troubled by love.

At this point, it would probably be prudent to mention that he was not alone in his room. His roommate, a young man named Dario, was also present. Dario happened to be his fiancee's younger brother who, through her connections, managed to enroll in Saint-Noel as Sapphias's attendant. Having access to the best education on the continent should have been an unqualified blessing, and indeed, he was extremely glad to be a student here, but it did come with a catch — every so often, he'd have to watch his future brother-in-law wailing in dismay because he was having trouble writing love letters to his sister. Top school on the continent or not, that was still a special kind of hell.

"Hey, Dario, what should I do? Do you think she'll forgive me?"

"Uhh... Sure, why not? I mean, she tends to be pretty 'eh, whatever' about things..." he answered somewhat wearily.

And going home provided no escape, as he'd be subject to the inverse with his sister going on and on about her romantic moments with Sapphias. It did, he thought, at least suggest that a minor failure like not getting into the student council wasn't going to affect their relationship.

"But... No, I can't. I have an image to maintain. Gah! If only Her Highness did as I said so she'd owe me a favor! Damn it..."

Awkward though the moment might be for Dario, it did not last

long. Just then, someone knocked politely on the door.

"Hm, I'll get that. Excuse me for a moment, Lord Sapphias."

"Come on, you can drop the Lord already. We're going to be brothers soon. Feel free to call me something more casual, like Saph."

"I'll keep that in mind, Lord Sapphias."

He walked to the door with a speed that betrayed his desire to remove himself from the current situation, only to frown quizzically at the sight of an unfamiliar man when he opened it.

"Pardon the intrusion, Lord Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon. Miss Rafina wishes to speak to you."

"...Eh?"

Sapphias turned to the man with an equally quizzical expression. He was a messenger sent by the academy's central authority figure, Rafina Orca Belluga. Unbeknownst to Sapphias, however, he might as well have been a messenger from Hell.

"M-Miss Rafina... Uh, I believe you wished to see me?"

Sapphias, after being led to the office of the student council he'd wanted so badly to be a part of, stepped through the door and was bathed in... not a wave of the satisfaction of finally setting foot in its hallowed chamber, but the unnerving gaze of Rafina, who sat with her back against her chair. She smiled sweetly at him, teacup and saucer held gracefully in her hands, and took a sip before setting them down on the empty table beside her.

Normally, it would be considered unacceptably rude to summon someone and, when they arrive, greet them by enjoying a cup of tea all by yourself. The only legitimate scenario for such a gesture would be when the summoned party was at considerable fault... and Sapphias had a very good idea what said fault might be. His head told him there was no way she could have found out, but his gut was pretty sure he was in trouble.

Rafina, meanwhile, kept her eyes on her cup as she quietly swirled around its umber contents, either unaware of or indifferent to his apprehension.

"U-Um... Miss Rafina?"

"Hm? Oh, my apologies," she said with a curt giggle. "I was thinking about something."

"Huh? Uh, what might that be?"

"Oh, just... What a friend of mine would do in a situation like

this."

"Huh... I'm not sure I—"

That was when Sapphias realized they weren't alone. Behind Rafina stood a girl he recognized. Her face was deathly pale, and for good reason; she was the one he'd bribed to spread malicious rumors about Rafina.

"There seems to be a lot going on behind the scenes, doesn't there? I have to say though, you must learn to cover your tracks better, or these actions of yours will surely lead to your ruin," Rafina said in her silvery voice.

Only then did she look up from her teacup and look him in the eyes. He shuddered at her gaze, pristine and piercing like dewdrops reflecting the morning sun.

"You're not fooling anyone."

Again, Mia's words echoed in his mind.

N-No way! Can she really know?

Shock stiffened his body as dread slowly crawled up his spine. Rafina regarded this reaction thoughtfully before continuing in a tone too gentle to be entirely genuine.

"You've presented me with a dilemma... You see, I believe that those who do wrong should be punished. Of course, it is but human to err, and in most cases, mercy may very well be called for. But you, Sapphias... You are the eldest son of a Duke," she said, fixing him with an icicle of a look. It was pure, and gleaming, and freezing cold. "We were born to different soil but similar stations. You are, I assume, well aware of the necessity of assuming responsibility for your actions in a manner befitting your rank?"

Sweat, profuse and cold, rolled down his back. The girl he'd dismissed as a mere daughter of a tiny nation's duke was, he now realized, an executor of justice acting in the name of God. Right now, her sword of judgment was hovering above his neck, and her eyes blazed with the conviction necessary to dispense righteous retribution upon those who sinned. Before she struck him down, though, the edge in her voice softened.

"But I know Mia would forgive you. She'd say that this is a school. That it is a place of teaching, and to expel students after only a single mistake would be cruel. And she would show you mercy."

Punishment served two functions. It sought to placate the victim's grievances by forcing the aggressor to suffer in return, and

it served as discipline for those who did wrong. To discipline was, in essence, to educate.

"In this case, I suppose *I* would be the victim, wouldn't I?" she wondered aloud as she pressed a musing hand to her cheek. "But it would appear as though true victimhood has escaped me... Like that time with Tiona, there is no need to placate any grievance of mine. That leaves us with ensuring that those who did wrong repent for their actions."

Sapphias watched with bewilderment as she spoke of an incident entirely unfamiliar to him. Then she chuckled.

"Say, Sapphias, would you happen to know if Mia said anything?"

"She said... she'll fight you fair and square," he answered, repeating what Tiona had said.

The attendant's word was the master's command. Such was the nature of noble society. To Sapphias, a lowly noble like Tiona was no different from an attendant. Therefore, he relayed her words to Rafina as Mia's own without a second thought.

"Ah... I see. She would say that, wouldn't she? That's just the kind of person she is, that dear friend of mine..." said Rafina, her voice trailing off into thought.

Then, sorrow clouded her brow, and she sighed.

"So why wouldn't she allow me to invite her into the council then?"

Chapter 31: The Melancholy of a (Real) Saint

"Oh dear... I seem to have run my mouth a tad."

Rafina grimaced at herself after Sapphias left. She drank down the last of her tea, its bitterness matching her expression, and murmured, "Being turned down by Mia must have hit me harder than I thought..."

The girl named Rafina Orca Belluga, bearing titles such as Saint of Belluga and the Holy Lady, was an object of reverence for the masses. The worship and adoration of her people, however, did not produce for her a single friend, and she'd lived most of her life without knowing the companionship of a close peer. Nevertheless, she never pitied herself. Her father loved her greatly, and her people treated her with kindness and respect. Her circumstances were, if anything, a blessing. Everyone treated her as someone special. And why wouldn't they? Her specialness was an objective fact. What use was there in denying it? There was only one Saint of Belluga, and she was it. She was utterly unique. It was only natural for her to be treated differently.

But at the same time, she couldn't help but think that the same applied to other people as well. Everyone was made to be their own unique person. Shaped individually by God, they were all different, and their traits were theirs alone. All traits were gifts from God, so all people deserved equal respect. So said God's teachings, and such was inscribed in Belluga's Holy Book. Consequently, Rafina found that her special treatment was a source of frustration for her. She was no more special than her peers. She wished they'd approach her the same way they did anyone else. Treat her the same.

Make friends with her the same.

One day, the daughter of a prominent noble came to her.

"Miss Rafina, would you please be my friend?"

Rafina was delighted by the request. Finally, she'd found

someone willing to approach her without any of that special treatment she detested. She brimmed with excitement at the prospect of having a normal friend. Then, some time later, she witnessed something she never wanted to — the sight of her new friend beating an attendant with a stick.

"How can you do something like that?" she asked, utterly baffled.

Her friend was supposed to be someone who did not subscribe to notions of status. Someone who was unswayed by the fiction of specialness. Someone who saw her not as a saint or noble, but as a person. Wasn't that why she'd befriended her? But if so, why was she capable of acting so cruelly toward her attendant?

The incident forced Rafina to turn her thoughts inward. After much reflection, the answer came to her. She realized why the noble girl treated her as an equal. The reason was simple; because she saw *herself* as her equal. Not an equal to Rafina the person, but an equal to Rafina the saint. The girl believed herself to be just as special, favored by God and endowed with superiority. It wasn't impartiality, it was just conceit.

What a tyrannical belief...

Rafina thought of all who lived in this land — a devout populace who believed in and were blessed by God — as one big family. The various members of that family, be they nobles, peasants, or even beggars on the street, differed only in role. Those born as an eldest son bore both the privilege and obligation of becoming the next head of their family. Second sons, likewise, bore their fair share, and the same went for daughters, fathers, mothers, and so on. Everyone had a role, and with it came its associated privileges and obligations. These roles were not comparable. There was no better or worse, none noble or base. They differed only in the contents of their respective duties. That was all.

That was why she had nothing but disdain for those who oppressed commoners and tyrannized their servants on the basis of being a noble. Conducting oneself in a manner befitting one's privilege and obligations was imperative. Failure to do so, in her eyes, was absolutely unforgivable.

And a Rafina who couldn't forgive... was a Rafina who couldn't make friends. Every noble who approached her was drawn to her status as a saint. She despised them for their despicable intentions; they weren't worthy of her friendship. Commoners, on the other

hand, held her in esteem, but made no attempt to befriend her. Eventually, she began to accept that her ordeals were simply an inevitable burden of her position. To be born into the role of the Saint of Belluga, she figured, was to endure a friendless life.

Then, just when she was ready to submit to her fate...

"Mia Luna Tearmoon."

...*She* appeared. When Rafina first learned of what she'd accomplished in the Tearmoon Empire, she'd been astonished. Though born into sovereignty as the daughter of the emperor, she did not luxuriate in the privileges of her rank, but rather worked to fulfill the obligations of her station. She acted benevolently toward the masses and spared kindness for even the most destitute of her populace. When Rafina heard that there were people referring to Mia as a saint, she couldn't help but feel a rising sense of anticipation toward the girl who shared her title.

"Maybe... Just maybe, she would agree to be my friend..."

From that day on, Rafina began looking forward to the day Mia would enroll in the academy. Her first chance to see the princess in the flesh was in the communal baths, where she displayed genuine consideration toward her maid, who was a commoner, going so far as to declare that she was her right hand and confidant. Her ability to see past the superficial gilding of rank and pedigree into the depths of a person's character left a strong impression on Rafina, who came out of their first exchange with her emotions stirred. Mia, she thought, was the kind of person she'd been looking for all this time.

But she was wrong.

"You're... even more than that, aren't you, Mia?"

During the incident at the evening ball, she witnessed Mia's forbearance. In dealing with those who committed a wrong, whenever possible, she sought to grant them a chance to make amends, and she made every attempt to realize that opportunity for them. Her approach was alien to Rafina, and yet...

"To err is human. To err unknowingly, more human still. Therefore, opportunities for redemption should be given in abundance... You are a much kinder person than I, Mia."

She was surprised to find herself comforted by the thought.

Inconsistency in punishment was a breeding ground for corruption. A light penalty for the offender robbed the victim of emotional solace. That was why, all her life, she'd viewed with

contempt people like Mia who forgave the guilty. Punishment was punishment. Those who held power were obligated to punish wrongdoing and right injustice. Mia, however, applied to the problem not principle but ingenuity, preemptively exerting her influence before serious damage — or, indeed, any kind of wrong — was done, thereby preserving the situation in a state where the party at fault could be afforded the chance to make amends. It was an approach to kindness that had never even crossed Rafina's mind, instilling in her a sentiment that was almost admiration. But despite all this...

"It breaks my heart to say this, Mia, but you won't win against me," she said softly to herself.

She could already see with a great deal of certainty how things would play out. Mia would lose the election. There was no question about that. Had she embraced Sapphias's scheme and resorted to underhanded tactics, she might have had a chance. Instead, she'd refused his proposal.

"Fair and square... with that kind conviction of hers... But she'll in turn be shackled by her virtues, making it impossible for her to win..."

Rafina believed in Mia and her passion for justice. How ironic it was, then, for that very belief to assure her of her own victory. So long as Mia was committed to doing what was right, she was sure to lose. And the reason for her inevitable loss was...

She shook her head, as though trying to stop herself from dwelling on the topic.

"I was looking forward to having her cheer me on too..." she murmured, the hint of sadness in her eyes coming from the girl within the saint. "She's my friend, so I thought she'd understand..."

Disheartened by the thought, she allowed herself to flatten her face against her desk, pouting as she felt its cool surface against her cheek. She of course knew why Mia was running against her. A rival candidate who could challenge her was necessary to ensure the fairness and function of the election. It also served to demonstrate the legitimacy of Rafina's own candidacy. Moreover, the role of her rival could only be played by someone who didn't place her on a pedestal.

"Gosh, this is so very frustrating..."

She knew. She knew all of it. But knowledge proved a poor bulwark against emotions, and she let out a lonely sigh.

“I’m trying, you know...”

Between developing countermeasures against the Chaos Serpents and performing her duties as the Saint of Belluga, along with running the student council as its president, even the diligent Rafina was showing signs of fatigue.

“I really am trying... so it’d be nice if...”

She trailed off, her suddenly-heavy lids drooping over her eyes, and soon succumbed to the pleasant oblivion of sleep.

Chapter 32: The Melancholy of a (Phony) Saint

Halfway through the election period, Mia sat with her crew in the classroom they'd borrowed for their campaign headquarters.

"Princess Mia, so far, the election is not going in our favor," said Chloe in a somber tone.

Ah. Well. No surprises there.

The news did not come as a shock to her. In fact, it felt quite reasonable to her. After all, even she couldn't see herself winning against Rafina. Her campaign promises turned out quite well, thanks in no small part to Abel and Sion, allowing her to present a solid platform that was no less impressive than Rafina's. No less impressive, but no more, either. And against someone like Rafina, adequacy was simply not good enough.

There were just too many unexpected developments...

Mia, for her part, had actually come into this with a plan of sorts. She'd intended to prepare a solid list of promises and establish an atmosphere in which she was seen as someone who could realistically become the student council president. Meanwhile, she'd be buying up votes from Tearmoon and Sunkland factions behind the scenes to try to eke out a win. Her grand design, however, had ended up stillborn.

Tiona's loud and unauthorized declaration that Mia would be taking the high road shut down communications with not only Sapphias but everyone related to the Four Dukes. At this point, she was entirely out of options. While one of the Etoilers might be harboring Chaos Serpents, their assistance was still necessary if she wished to rally the Tearmoon nobles to her. Worse yet, if she couldn't secure all the Tearmoon votes, the Sunkland votes would be a lost cause. After all, who was going to support a candidate who couldn't even convince her own kinsmen to vote for her? She couldn't reach out to Sion either, seeing as he'd already made clear his intention to remain a neutral party. In the end, preliminary

polling revealed that public opinion was largely in favor of Rafina.

"Currently, support for Miss Rafina versus yourself is about nine to one," said Chloe.

My! A tenth of the students support me?! Mia lifted her eyebrows in exaggerated surprise. *There sure are a lot of people who like to get on sinking ships! Ohoho!*

She'd reached the self-deprecation stage of grief.

"We need to turn this around somehow," said Chloe.

Mia gave her a wry grin.

"Easier said than done, isn't it?"

There was something in the room — something she knew well. She could smell it in the air, feel it on her skin, and see it on the faces of the students gathered in the room — defeat. As she looked at them each in turn, an old memory resurfaced.

Ahh, these faces... They look just like the faces of the imperial guards during the final days of the revolution.

She remembered how, knowing full well none of them would make it back alive, the soldiers didn't even try to hide their looks of resignation before making their final charge toward the revolutionary army. The students in the room all wore the same expression as they returned her weary gaze in kind.

I'm starting to think we ought to just assume we'll lose and start preparing for the aftermath.

The dejected mood in the room proved infectious, and Mia found herself half ready to throw in the towel. The only ones who still seemed to believe they could win were Abel, Tiona... and Chloe, who was leading the discussion. She'd even made the rounds through all the classrooms to gather data for analysis.

"Does anyone have any ideas? The more specific the better," Chloe said, undeterred by the thick air of defeatism.

After a brief silence, a hand shot up. It belonged to Tiona Rudolvon.

"How about we decide on a color to represent us?"

Her question earned her puzzled stares from everyone in the room.

"Everyone who supports Her Highness will wear something of that color on them," she continued, "so we all match. It might be sort of hard to do that for all our clothes though..."

"Branding through color, huh. Nice and simple. If we can find a bunch of scarves that are all the same color and wrap them on our

arms, I think it'll be quite effective. Appearances matter, after all," said Chloe, nodding as she explained that she'd seen a similar strategy employed in some other nation's election.

"It works on the battlefield too," added Abel. "I've heard that Sunkland has an elite squadron of knights who are clad in black from head to toe. The color scheme also makes it easy for them to identify each other as allies, which promotes solidarity. That does leave us with the crucial question, though, what color do we use?"

One of Mia's groupies offered an idea.

"I think the color that best represents Miss Rafina is white, so how about we go with a calm color as well? Like some shade of blue?"

Mia winced at the suggestion.

"Blue..."

The color evoked memories of a group of people whose revolutionary venture in Remno ended in failure.

That reminds me of... what were they called again? Right, the Blue Scarves.

It was, she thought, not the best thing to be associated with. In fact, it was downright awful. She'd practically be jinxing herself.

Then again, why am I even worried? I'm immune to jinxes. You can't jinx someone who never had a chance to begin with.

Mia was still firmly stuck in self-deprecation mode. Meanwhile, her classmates kept suggesting ever more fanciful colors — yellow, green, peach, ocher, and so on — until Chloe doused their enthusiasm with a dose of reality.

"Actually, we're limited by dyes, so if we want to get this done quickly, there are only a couple of colors that are viable."

In the end, their choices were whittled down to either a bright yellow Chloe described as 'flamboyant' or a deep shade of red.

"If we go with red, we'll be using a dye made from twilight roses. The name of the color is literally 'twilight rose red.' As for yellow, it's, uh, this color."

Chloe produced a handkerchief, and even Mia grimaced at just how damn *yellow* the thing was. It immediately became clear why "flamboyant" was an appropriate adjective.

That... is a little too much. We're going to look like a bunch of idiots.

The only thing they'd manage to accomplish with a color like that was to label themselves a bunch of flagrant attention-seekers.

That was definitely not good for branding. Consequently, their choice of color naturally settled on the other option.

“Red, sure, whatever,” muttered Mia with disinterest, paying little attention to the rest of the discussion, only to regret her indifference a few days later upon seeing the finished product.

“Th-This color is...”

As a matter of fact, the deep, sanguine hue known as twilight rose red had another name — guillotine red. The logic behind the naming was self-explanatory, and it called to mind exactly the kind of imagery Mia would rather never, ever think about.

“Ahh... This has to be a sign. I’m done for... U-Ugh...”

She proceeded to collapse on the spot, sending Anne and the others into a wild panic as the election period neared its home stretch.

Chapter 33: Princess Mia… Is Running Out of Options

"Please vote for Princess Mia!"

Unified by their newly established color, the members of the Mia faction campaigned with renewed vigor. Ribbons of guillotine red adorning their chests, their spirited voices resonated in the halls as they canvassed the school. Mia herself participated, reading her campaign promises to anyone willing to listen, with a cordial smile. Figuring their only chance at victory was to do what Rafina couldn't, their campaign efforts tended toward the adventurous. When Abel suggested she try delivering a speech on horseback, she started wondering if they'd finally gone too far… but the performance ended up being surprisingly well-received by the Equestrian students, significantly elevating her opinion of Abel's strategic prowess. As a result of their unconventional efforts, support for Mia slowly began to climb. Despite that, she was eons away from truly tilting the balance in her favor.

"According to Chloe's analysis… we've managed to pull our numbers up to just under twenty percent," said Mia before letting out a weary sigh.

Her fellow campaigners present in the headquarters followed suit. They'd made progress, but said progress had plateaued. Victory was still far out of their grasp.

But I can't just call it quits either…

She'd tried to wring more details out of Bel the night before, but all she managed to figure out in the end was that Ludwig had been supremely confident in his analysis that Mia had needed to become the student council president for the world to avoid disaster. Which, given her current situation, was an extremely unwelcome piece of knowledge.

We're so far behind I can't see how we'd possibly turn this around…

Making things worse was the fact that plenty of people — Bel, Anne, Tiona, and Chloe, to name a few — were still convinced that

she would pull through in the end. She shuddered at the thought of losing the election and seeing the looks of sheer disappointment on their faces.

U-Ugh... Just imagining it is making me feel bad...

Her glum contemplation was interrupted by Abel, who approached her with a grave expression.

"Mia, do you have a moment?"

"My, Abel. What's the matter?"

"I... just wanted to apologize. For interfering with your campaign promises. This situation is my fault..."

"Huh?"

Her baffled reaction only turned his tight-lipped frown into a bitter grimace.

"I know you based most of your official platform on the one I drafted. That makes me responsible for these dismal results we're seeing. You probably could have come up with much better ideas... Wonderful ideas that would never have crossed my mind... But because I showed up with my list, you decided to be nice to me and use them, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about? Nothing could be further from the truth!"

She meant it, too.

"If you hadn't shown up to help, I wouldn't even *have* a list of campaign promises right now!"

What she said was one hundred and twenty percent true. There wasn't a hint of false modesty in her claim. Its veracity was further validated by a voice at the door.

"She's right, you know," said Sion as he entered the room. "Humility is only a virtue when displayed in moderation, Prince Abel. Have some faith in yourself."

"But..."

"You saw Miss Rafina's platform, didn't you? Her policies are impeccable. Do you really think we could have produced something that surpassed it in quality? And even if we did, how much better could it possibly have been? Enough to erase Miss Rafina's overwhelming lead over Mia? I think not."

The large gap in support between the two candidates could be attributed to incumbent advantage. Rafina, who already had an impressive track record, could simply play it safe with her campaign promises. Mia, on the other hand, had no

accomplishments under her belt and her political competence was yet unknown. In order for her to win, she'd need to come out with some truly groundbreaking ideas to win over the students' hearts.

"In essence, there was no chance of us outdoing Miss Rafina on campaign promises, so long as we went about it properly," concluded Sion.

"What an odd thing to say. If we don't go about it properly, what are we supposed to do?" asked Mia with a puzzled tilt of her head.

He gave her a knowing look before shaking his head.

"Really, Mia? You of all people should know the answer to that."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I asked Bel about those campaign ideas I saw in the library the other day, and she told me that you were the one who wrote them."

"...Huh?"

It took her a few moments before she realized he was talking about the unfiltered list of personal desires she'd put down on paper.

B-Bel! You little traitor! You sold me out! I was going to take that to the grave!

Objectively speaking, she'd never explicitly forbidden Bel from disclosing the original author of Project MSC, so it wasn't technically a betrayal. That didn't make it any easier to stomach though, and she had to force down a cry of dismay.

"...What's this now?" asked Abel, his brows furrowed in cautious curiosity.

"U-Uh, it's not what you think. Y-You see, I..." stammered Mia.

She was about to make an excuse for her embarrassing creation when Sion answered in her place.

"That list of promises was the way to go. The content could perhaps use a little more work, but in terms of approach, it was definitely the correct one."

"...Eh?"

"I see you have no intention of dropping the act. Fair enough. I shall keep explaining then," he said, addressing everyone else in the room. "You see, what she realized was that an impartial, principled approach to her platform would have no chance against Miss Rafina. Therefore, as a thought experiment of sorts, she tried jotting down some promises that were... a little less noble."

“I see what you mean.” Abel nodded, his eyes widening with understanding.

Both princes regarded Mia with more than a little admiration in their gazes.

“U-Uh… Well, I suppose you have me figured out. That’s exactly it…”

She jumped on the bandwagon. Which was definitely awkward, considering the other passengers were all under the impression she’d been driving, but such inconsistencies were nothing a smug grin couldn’t resolve. So she put one on and looked around the room as though she were asking them *Did it really take you people* this *long to catch on?* The beads of cold sweat rolling down her back were very uncomfortable, but a seasoned prevaricator like Mia wasn’t going to let that get in the way of her performance.

TA-
-DA!

“And there you have it. As you can see, Prince Abel, there’s no need for you to be sorry. Mia had already explored ways in which she could beat Miss Rafina, and she gave those up willingly.”

“What do you mean? If there’s a way to win, why give it up?”

“Don’t you see? What happens if you take that train of thought and push it to its logical conclusion? Let’s say we tried to differentiate ourselves by maximizing ideological distinction. What’s a promise that runs most counter to Miss Rafina’s ideals? Instituting preferential treatment for prominent nobles, perhaps?”

“What? Are you out of your mind, Prince Sion? We can’t do that.”

Abel blinked in astonishment, but Sion shook his head.

“You may not wish to, but the unfortunate truth is that it would be a very effective strategy. Miss Rafina is a benevolent individual, but she is equally benevolent toward commoners and nobles. If anything, she judges nobles more harshly, and I’d hardly be surprised if a good number of them aren’t particularly fond of that approach.”

“I see. Proposing the same sorts of things as Miss Rafina wouldn’t give people any reason to shift their vote away from her. If we fight her on her terms, she’s just going to come out with a perfect list of principled, impartial promises and crush us.”

Between the financial capabilities of the student council and the labor it could muster, there was a limit to what the organization could realistically achieve, especially when factoring in the overarching restrictions of the academy as a whole. Assume, for example, that Saint-Noel had a total of twenty problems to solve, and the student council had the capacity to deal with ten of them. While this would ostensibly allow for numerous permutations in choosing which problems to solve, the actual number of variations was much lower in practice. Those with an accurate grasp of the academy’s condition and a thorough understanding of the student council’s capabilities would naturally reach the same conclusions as to what could be realistically accomplished. The only difference, then, would be their priorities.

Therefore, if Rafina took the side of good in her campaign promises, Mia would have to present evil ones. If Rafina promoted fair and impartial treatment for all students, Mia would have to

offer unfair, preferential treatment for certain groups. That was the only way for Mia to differentiate herself. So long as the council had to operate within the confines of its staffing and budgetary limits, the ways in which it could be run would converge toward the same point. If Rafina was already standing on that point, there would be no room left for Mia.

The two princes continued to discuss the principles of election strategy, paying little attention to Mia, whose cheeks had been steadily ballooning as she listened.

How terribly unfair of Rafina to take all the good ideas and use them for herself! That's cheating!

Chapter 34: Mia Evolved into... Passive-Aggressive Mia!

Unable to reverse her fortunes, Mia continued to trail far behind Rafina through the last stretch of the election period until finally, the day had come for the ballots to be cast.

"U-Ugh... What do I do..."

She was now fully up the proverbial creek without a paddle, and her desperate attempts over the past couple days to locate some sort of metaphorical rowing instrument had not only been futile but also left her mentally drained. She'd thought and thought, racking her brains for a way out of her conundrum, but no inspiration struck. The clock was ticking — all that remained was the final speeches before the voting — and there was no way to turn the tide.

Ahh... I don't feel anything coming. There's no wind at my back. No wave pushing me forward.

She sat stranded in her creek, windless, waveless, helpless. The whims of fortune that had always come to her aid when she was in trouble seemed to have forsaken her this time.

There's nothing! Absolutely nothing...

Only now did it begin to dawn on her that this might be the direst strait she'd been in since leaping backward through time.

Elections were a sacred affair at Saint-Noel, and the voting was carried out with the same air of solemn ceremony as the Opening Mass. As its proceedings would decide the next president, the day was considered especially hallowed, and candidates were to humbly cleanse their bodies and don holy garments of pure white.

Located beneath the academy was a place called the Cleansing Spring. Surfaces of white, polished stone lent an air of tranquility to the spacious underground chamber, in the middle of which was a fountain that emitted a continuous stream of clear spring water. Custom dictated candidates wash themselves off in the fountain.

Mia parted with her garments at the entrance and walked in,

chastely unclothed. She slipped into the water, wincing a little at first at its temperature. It wasn't bitingly cold — some hot water had been added beforehand — but it still stung a bit. She soon acclimatized, however, and her feverishly overworked head found its coolness quite pleasant.

"Phew..."

She exhaled as she lowered herself into the water. Then she looked sideward, where Rafina was methodically cleaning herself from head to toe.

Ugh, why is she so infuriatingly gorgeous? I can't even...

Her smooth, milky skin and long, silky hair sparkled in the clear water, highlighting her beauty in a way that even a fellow female like Mia had to admit was attractive.

Gah! It's not fair! It's not fair at all!

Mia's already-low spirits deteriorated further at the realization that Rafina trounced her in the beauty department too, completing her transformation into a new state of being. No longer was she just Mia; now, she was Moody Mia.

"Hm? Mia? Is something the matter?" asked Rafina, who'd noticed Mia's furrow-browed gaze.

"Oh, it's nothing. Nothing at all. Ohoho," she said with a deflecting chuckle before undergoing another transformation.

Moody Mia, you see, was only her first evolution. Now, she underwent her second to reveal her final form: Passive-Aggressive Mia.

"But I must say, Miss Rafina, you look awfully tired. It must be *so hard* for you."

To be so perfect all the time.

Passive-Aggressive Mia still lacked a real spine, so she kept the truth of her comments to herself. In her head though, she was going all in.

"I can only imagine how it must feel to be in your position..."

...Knowing that you're smart and pretty and good at everything you do. I wish I had such a difficult *life!*

In her mind she spat the words like venom, punctuating each one with an angry scrub of her legs with the washcloth.

"Say, Mia..."

Hearing her name spoken, she shot a humorless glance at Rafina, who'd submerged the entirety of herself in the pool, leaving just enough of her head above water to speak.

“Would you...” Rafina said, turning to face her, “be willing to withdraw your candidacy?”

Mia stared back.

“...Excuse me? And what exactly do you mean by that?” she asked, her eyes hard.

Rafina parried the hostile gaze with a polite smile and continued.

“Knowing you, Mia, I’m sure you’re fully aware that we don’t even need to count the votes to know how this election will turn out. You won’t win.”

Polling could only provide an estimate of voter preference, but for this election, the difference was so stark that it might as well be confirmation.

“The results aren’t out yet. If you back out now, you can soften the blow.”

No matter what reasons her fellow students suspected her of having for running in the election, their opinion of her was generally unfavorable. Most saw her as an egotistical princess who thought too highly of herself, and should the election proceed as planned, its results would surely cement that image. However, if she were to withdraw her candidacy right now, it would suggest to people that she possessed at least enough awareness — both of herself and prevailing opinions — to see the writing on the wall and bow out, thereby preserving some of her dignity.

“You’re my friend, Mia... I don’t want to fight you, much less hurt you. So, please?”

It was, for Rafina, an act of kindness; she felt it her duty to offer mercy for someone she considered a friend.

“I’m sorry, Miss Rafina, but I can’t do that,” Mia said with a shake of her head. “I can’t afford to lose...”

She needed to win against Rafina in order to avert the calamitous future that awaited them all. She had to do it one way or another; she just hadn’t figured out how. Disappointment, tinged with the pain of betrayal, clouded Rafina’s brow.

“This is really quite upsetting,” she said, her eyes downcast, before lowering her voice to a whisper. “Because... I thought we were friends...”

“Don’t you mean... because we *are* friends?” Mia muttered back.

Her resentful tone caught Rafina off guard, drawing her startled gaze right back.

Because we're friends... I figured you'd go easy on me and leave me some freebies... Well, so much for that!

The policy proposals Rafina included in her platform covered every important issue that was currently relevant to Saint-Noel. *All of them.* She didn't leave a single one for Mia. This inevitably meant Mia's list of promises would end up being utterly unremarkable due to the similarity of its contents; there simply weren't any significant issues left for her to mention. For obvious reasons, such promises were not going to bring her any closer to victory.

She took all the good issues for herself! That's so mean! Here I was hoping she'd leave some for me, considering we're supposed to be friends and all, but nope! She just went into full beatdown mode! No mercy whatsoever!

Her passive-aggressiveness had reached its peak, and she delivered her most indirectly hostile remark yet.

"But then again, maybe I'm wrong... Since you seem to be perfectly fine with holding onto absolutely everything!"

Chapter 35: Two Pairs of Teary Eyes

"...Huh?"

The remark took Rafina completely by surprise. She watched in bafflement as Mia rose from the pool and began to walk away.

"Mia? What... What do you mean?"

She was answered with silence, save for the light patter of wet feet on the polished stone. Only then did she realize she'd angered Mia.

"Mia... Why?"

She quickly went over the last few things she'd said in her head, but none seemed particularly culpable. She had absolutely no idea why Mia was angry.

...*Or do I?* asked a voice she knew to be her own.

She turned her thoughts inward, digging deep into her memories, where she discovered a previously unexamined fragment. Unearthing it revealed the scene from earlier, when they'd both just gotten into the pool. That was when Mia, her voice stiff and her expression concerned, had said, *"But I must say, Miss Rafina, you look awfully tired. It must be* so hard *for you."*

Something glimmered in a corner of her mind.

Mia... She was... worried about me?

She reached for it, pushing through the fog of confusion until...

She... was trying to lighten my burden?

She finally grasped it, and comprehension surged through her like a bolt of lightning.

Lately, Rafina had indeed been feeling a little tired. She'd always kept a grueling schedule, and it had only gotten exponentially more demanding with the appearance of the Chaos Serpents. Did she really think someone like Mia wouldn't be aware of her exhaustion? And if she were aware, what would she do as a friend?

She'd express her concern... through her actions...

Mia couldn't take her place as the Duke of Belluga's daughter; that role was hers alone. Neither could she take charge of their

budding anti-Serpent faction; it had to be the Holy Lady of Belluga who led the offensive against the secret society. The student council president's job was different. It was the only role Mia could take from her — the only load she could lighten. And so she had, offering to relieve Rafina of those duties and shoulder part of her burden.

What is a friend if not someone who shares in one's plights and pleasures? Mia was, through her very actions, demonstrating that she considered herself Rafina's friend — the kind of friend she'd always wanted, who treated her not as someone divine or special but as an equal. As someone who'd stood by her side and shared in her joy, Mia had intended to share her burdens as well.

That was when Rafina realized something else; Mia's campaign promises — promises birthed from the mind of the Great Sage of the Empire — were little more than a rephrasing of her own, advocating almost identical policies and ideals. Would someone possessed of such intellect as to stop a revolution in Remno and implement numerous reforms in her home country... be content to produce something so uninspired?

Did she... do it on purpose?

How hard could it possibly have been for Mia to propose some radical ideas? And yet, she'd purposefully chosen policies that were in line with Rafina's current approach to governance. The reason was obvious. She wasn't trying to defeat Rafina; she was trying to send a message — "hand me some of your work so I can shoulder part of your burden." The similarities between their platforms was for Rafina's peace of mind, to show that she'd be leaving her duties in good hands.

All this time, she was thinking of me... and what did I say to her in return?

She continued to mentally retrace her steps, bracing herself for where she knew they would lead, but she still grimaced when her own voice from moments before began to echo in her mind, telling Mia to withdraw her candidacy because she wasn't going to win. She watched in helpless horror as her dear friend extended a helping hand toward her, only for her past self to slap it away and — in a display of conceit rendered in excruciating clarity by hindsight — offer what she thought was mercy in return.

Could it be that for all my fixation on our friendship... I'm actually the one who failed to place my full trust in her?

“M-Mia...” she said in a voice so trembling and weak she barely recognized it as her own.

With desperate urgency, she reached toward Mia’s receding form — to stop her, plead with her, ask her to listen — but her outstretched hand touched only the chasm between them. It hung in the air for a brief moment before falling feebly down to her side. What could she say? What *was* there to say? She’d had the chance to have a true friend... and she’d squandered it.

And now, it’s too late. Her vision blurred. *It’s all too late.*

Despair began to consume her. Like a dark, shapeless mass, it invaded her mind, oozing into every recess of thought in its path. That was when she heard Mia’s voice.

“Miss Rafina.”

Everything — her thoughts, her breath, even the encroaching darkness — seemed to freeze, as Mia herself had.

“I am of the opinion...” the princess said, still facing away, “that there is no friendship without forgiveness.”

“...Huh?”

Forgiveness? Mia... is willing to forgive me? But...

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. Afraid it was a trick of the ears, she willed air through her parched lips and asked in a hoarse whisper, “You mean... we’re—”

“Friends. And what are friends if not those willing to overlook, from time to time, the mistakes and affronts we commit in each other’s presence?”

And with that, she turned around at last to reveal a warm and slightly bashful smile.

“Wouldn’t you agree?”

Friends...? This is... what it’s like to...

In that moment, it all became clear. She knew without a shadow of a doubt that the girl before her, Mia Luna Tearmoon, was the friend she’d been looking for all her life. For so long, she’d yearned for a kindred spirit — someone in whom she could trust and confide — and finally... she’d *found* her.

“I...”

She bit her lip. Suddenly, the world melted into a kaleidoscope of colors, and there was the gentle sound of raindrops falling into water. Looking down, she was surprised to find a steady stream of crystalline tears falling from her cheeks.

T-Tears? They’re... mine? I’m crying? Why?

Rafina, who rarely allowed herself to cry in another's presence, was thoroughly flustered by her own reaction. Such an uncontrollable surge of emotions was foreign to her.

I should be happy. I know I am, so why... Oh, my face must be such a mess. I can't let Mia see me like this.

She squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to stop the tears, but it was like trying to hold back the tide. They fell and fell in an endless stream. Soon, her nose was running too, and she began to sniffle. She hastily spun around and waded to the fountain's source, allowing the cool water to fall over her head, washing her face free of tears. Then, to make doubly sure, she rubbed her eyes clean and turned to face Mia again.

She wanted to say thank you. And sorry. But she gulped the words back down, not trusting her voice to produce anything more than a trembling sob. Instead, she returned Mia's smile, the expression dawning over her whole face as her lips curled up to meet the glistening corners of her beautiful eyes, now reddened from tearful emotion.

Oh, how glad I am to have made a friend like Mia...

"M-Mia..."

The instant Mia heard the unsteadiness in Rafina's voice, all of the heat and anger drained away from her. They were replaced by cold dread, which slowly crawled down her spine, sending chills through her whole body. Rafina, living embodiment of composure and restraint, was having trouble controlling her emotions. What could be upsetting her so much? After quickly reflecting on their conversation, she came to a chilling realization — it was *her*.

Not only had she thrown what amounted to a passive-aggressive fit, she'd ignored Rafina's attempts to talk to her, choosing instead to sulk by herself. As a result, Rafina's voice was now shaking... with anger! She was furious! So furious that the only thing she could manage was to utter Mia's name!

Eeeeeek! Th-This is bad! This is very very bad!

In focusing on the election, Mia had lost sight of something important. No matter how badly her campaign was going, taking out her frustrations on Rafina was still an extremely bad idea. After all, the world wasn't going to end the instant she lost the election, which meant there was going to be a lot of time afterward for her to suffer the consequences.

M-Merciful moons! What should I do?! Ahh, that was so stupid of me!

She frantically put her mind to work, trying to think of an excuse for her prior actions. She thought and thought... until an idea finally came to her, and she leapt on it with the desperation of a drowning child who'd found a floating log.

"Miss Rafina, I am of the opinion..." she said, still facing away because she was too scared to make eye contact. "That there is no friendship without forgiveness."

The plan was to remind Rafina of their friendship while subtly incorporating forgiveness into its definition — the verbal equivalent of a sleight of hand.

"Huh? You mean... We're—"

"Friends," she declared with a tone of finality before blitzkrieging through the rest of her logic. "And what are friends if not those willing to overlook from time to time the mistakes and affronts we commit in each other's presence?"

Friends forgive each other.

They were friends.

Therefore, Rafina should forgive her.

Q.E.D.

When it came to saving her own skin, Mia was fully willing to play dirty. She knew that Rafina, by virtue of being the one who made the initial proposition that they be friends, wouldn't go back on her word, so she took advantage of that fact to force her hand. It was a profoundly underhanded tactic that could be summed up with: You *said we were friends, so you have to forgive me.*

Then, just to be safe, she turned around and put on her best *You know I was just playing around, right?* smile. Rafina simply stared, her expression unreadable. Then she lowered her gaze. Her shoulders started to shake. The motion soon spread to her limbs and torso, causing her to bite down on her own lip.

Eeeeeek! All that did was make her even madder at me!

Mia instantly regretted her half-baked charm offensive, wishing she'd just apologized properly instead. Before she could follow up, however, Rafina spun around and marched to the fountain, where she promptly plunged her head into its stream.

Sweet moons! Is she so angry that she needs to pour cold water over her head to stay in control of herself?!

She watched in utter horror as Rafina pulled her head away

from the fountain, turned, and contorted her still-dripping face into what might have passed as a smile… had her cheeks not been twitching and her eyes not been bloodshot.

Eeeeeeek! That's terrifying! Look at those eyes! She's downright livid! But she's still trying to smile, so she must be telling herself that she should forgive me because we're friends… In which case maybe I'll actually get out of this in one piece…

Seeing Rafina's strained smile as an effort to quell her anger through adherence to the — slightly doctored — principles of friendship, Mia allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief.

Oh, am I ever glad I made friends with her beforehand… she thought, the tears of terror in her eyes replaced by tears of relief.

Chapter 36: The Spread of Red

After her mentally draining experience at the Cleansing Spring, Mia shambled out of the chamber to her waiting maid.

"Are you okay, milady?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine..."

"Um... All right. If you say so."

Anne frowned but nevertheless got to work, drying Mia's hair and dressing her in holy garments with characteristic efficiency. Once she was done, she stepped back, looked over her handiwork, and nodded with approval.

"You can do this, milady. Go out there and show them what you're made of," she said, giving her mistress a final pep talk.

Mia, meanwhile, was staring blankly out into space and barely processed what Anne was saying. The exchange with Rafina had scared her out of her wits, and she'd yet to retrieve enough of them to manage any semblance of focus.

"Oh, and just to remind you," added Anne, "the veil is really light and falls easily. Try to be careful so it doesn't slip off."

"...Huh? Oh, uh, sure. Okay. Thanks, Anne," Mia answered, snapping out of her glassy-eyed daze.

With her wits regathered, she finally took a proper look at her saintly attire. Her lips twisted into a jaded smile.

Even if defeat is all but guaranteed, a general must still ride to the battlefield. Well, let's get this over with, then...

Election day consisted of two events: a solemn ritual, followed by the casting of votes. The proceedings took place in the cathedral, at the front of which was a long communion table. Sitting atop the table was a large silver chalice filled with red wine, representing the blood of saints. The elected candidate would symbolically take this "blood" into their body by drinking from the chalice, thereby swearing before God to conduct themselves in a just and upright manner as president.

Row after row of students filed into the cathedral, filling it

entirely. The last to arrive were the candidates themselves, Mia and Rafina, whose appearance signaled the beginning of the pre-voting ritual. A number of hymns were sung in unison, after which it was time for the candidates to deliver their final speeches. The first to speak was Mia. She stepped up to the communion table and quietly scanned the room. As she did, a few isolated cheers from the crowd reached her ears.

"You got this, Princess Mia!"

"Go for it!"

"We believe in you!"

For Saint-Noel Academy, the student council election was a sacred rite. Verbal outbursts from the audience, no matter the reason, were of course prohibited. The priest presiding over the ceremony eyed them with disapproval and...

"All right, all right. Keep it down over there."

...Mildly rebuked them for their offense. Presumably, the God of the Central Orthodox Church was a tolerant fellow, and the priest was simply adhering to the attitude of his deity.

Mia glanced in the direction of the cheers to find a group of students all wearing red armbands. They were, of course, the members of her faction.

I thought for sure they'd all given up already and gone off to do other things...

Hers was clearly a lost cause, it was plain as day. Despite that, not a single one of them had abandoned her. They'd followed her through thick and thin, staying staunchly by her side throughout the election period. She remembered the times they'd spent thinking, working, and laughing together — memories she'd shared with her unwavering supporters — and a quiet smile of nostalgia spread across her lips.

You know, now that I think about it, it was pretty fun.

Her previous life had never afforded her the chance to enjoy a school event like this. As she regarded her ragtag band of diehard believers, their loyalty in no way inferior to that of the imperial guardsmen who gave their lives for her past self, a deep sense of gratitude welled up within her, and she lowered her head in a deep bow.

Thank you. For your loyalty. You can be sure that I'll repay you one day...

The gesture caused her veil to slip off her head. It floated

briefly, riding a gentle current of air, before descending into the silver chalice.

"Ah..."

Within seconds, the pure white fabric of the veil soaked up the wine, turning blood red.

Ugh, nothing's going right for me... It's the final ceremony, and I still managed to mess up...

She was about to reach over and fish out the soggy veil when someone placed a new, unsullied veil over her head. Then, a pair of arms reached past her and pulled her veil out of the chalice. Slowly, she turned her head in the direction of the arms, only to freeze in shock upon discovering who they belonged to.

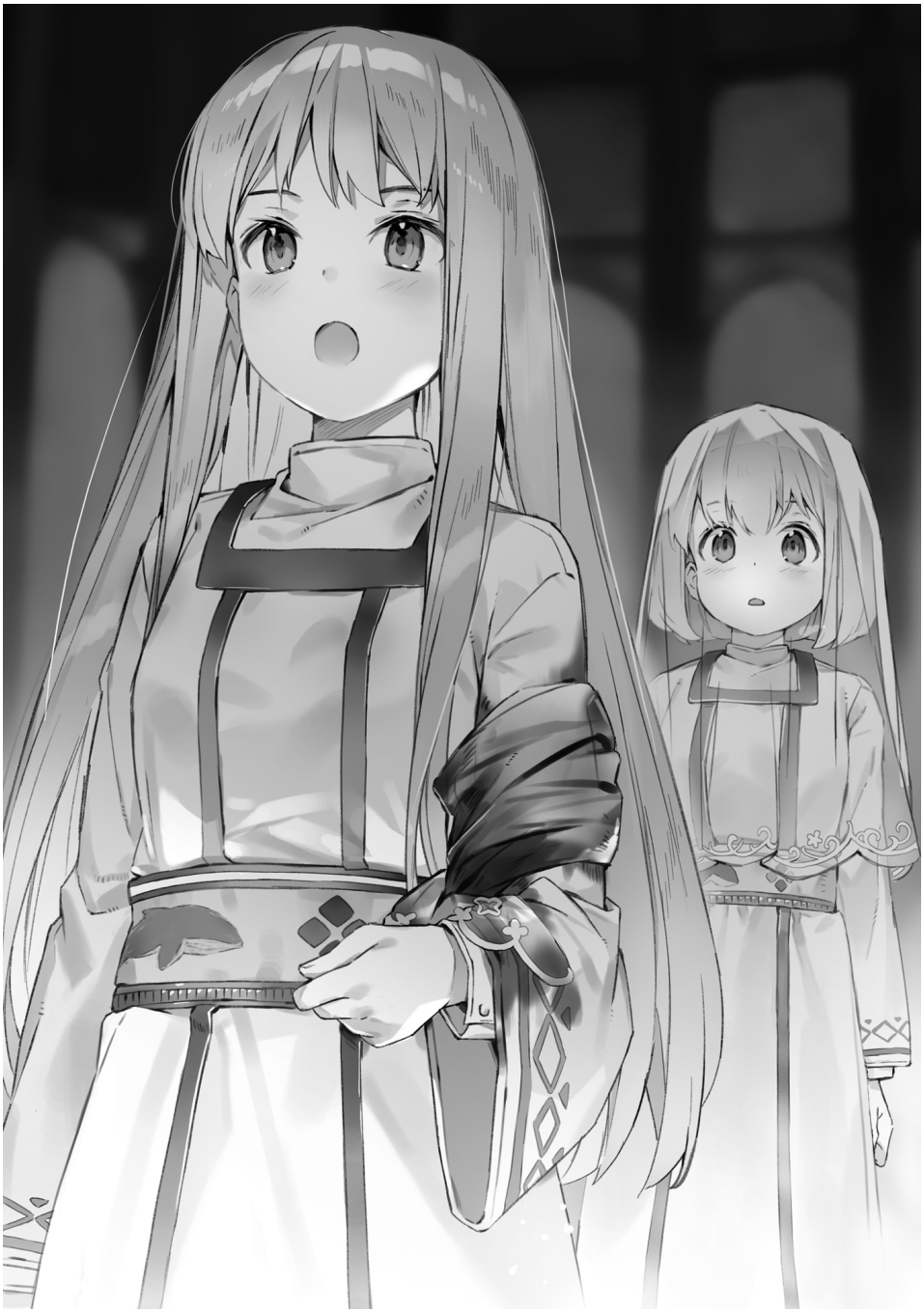
"M-Miss Rafina?"

After draping her own veil over Mia's head, Rafina picked up the one in the chalice and wrung it out, paying no mind to the wine that splashed on her white garments. Then, she took the reddened strip of fabric, and wrapped it around her arm. She held it up, proudly displaying that unmistakable symbol for all to see — the deep red armband that signified the wearer's support for Mia Luna Tearmoon.

"M-My Lady, this is..."

The priest gave Rafina an uncertain look. She gave a reassuring one in return before taking a step forward.

"To all those who supported me, I offer you my sincerest apologies. I, Rafina Orca Belluga, hereby withdraw my candidacy for the student council presidency. At the same time, I formally endorse my friend, Mia Luna Tearmoon, for the role," she declared, her resonant voice infused with grace and gravity.



“L-Lady Rafina!”

The priest cried out in alarm at the unanticipated development. Never in the long history of Saint-Noel had such a thing ever occurred. A candidate backing out on the day of the election right before the final speech was preposterous enough, but for that candidate to be both the current president as well as the daughter of the Duke of Belluga... It was simply too much to reckon with at one time.

The students exploded into commotion. Amidst an ever-expanding ripple of confusion and excitement, Rafina stood like a statue of serenity. Only Mia caught a glimpse of the mischievous grin that flashed across her lips. Their eyes met for a second, and Rafina winked at her.

Wh-What in the moons... is going on?

Mia also stood like a statue; a completely bewildered statue. For a long while, she could manage nothing else.

Elections were considered sacred in Saint-Noel Academy. They were intended to be solemn affairs, carried out with the utmost respect before the watchful eyes of God. With that said, the God of the Central Orthodox Church was known to be a clement deity. Disruptive behavior, should it be committed in bad faith, would be punished accordingly. Intentional mischief during the proceedings could invalidate the legitimacy of the entire event, leading to all results being declared null and void. However, should it be done earnestly and with sincere motivations... No matter how unorthodox the behavior, it would be deemed permissible.

Indeed, even actions as unorthodox as badly fumbling a word during the Opening Mass speech... And, of course, a sudden withdrawal of candidacy right before the votes were cast.

Thus, a reborn Saint-Noel Academy witnessed the birth of a new student council. The induction of the Tearmoon Princess, Mia Luna Tearmoon, as its president was a pivotal moment that would have lasting effects on the rest of history. As for what those effects were... Well, those stories yet remain to be told.

Chapter 37: The Holy Lady's Tragedy and Mia's Ambition

"Hmm..."

Tucked away in a corner of the Newmoon District in the imperial capital of Lunatear was a small dilapidated cabin, from which the muted murmurs of an old man could be heard. Time wore equally on all souls, and even Ludwig Hewitt, who in his prime had used his brilliant mind to its full potential in service of the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, now bore a grandfatherly air.

"I see Lady Miabel is not particularly dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge..." he mused, stroking his gray beard as he regarded the diminutive figure snoozing on the bed. "How soundly she sleeps... Ahhh, but the resemblance..."

He ran his fingers through her silken hair, brushing a few errant strands from her cheek, as kindly wrinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes.

"Lady Miabel is still young. There is still much room for her to develop and grow. She has, after all, inherited *her* blood..."

He closed his eyes, but the darkness was soon brightened by a proud vision of Her Highness standing tall in all her radiant glory, her untamable wit and fierce intelligence a beacon of hope for all who beheld her.

"What we need," he murmured, "is hope for the future. We need someone like Her Highness, who will light our way and guide our path."

What the empire needed... was a lodestar. As someone through whose veins the blood of the Great Sage of the Empire ran, Miabel was well-positioned to become a rallying figure for the empire's people. Should she assume that role, she would need knowledge, and though she lacked formal education, Ludwig was committed to providing her with at least the basics. How much of his lessons were sticking, however...

“It looks like we have a long road ahead of us...”

He smiled helplessly and shook his head before sitting down behind his musty old desk, idly glancing at the pieces of parchment stacked atop it.

“Rafina Orca Belluga, huh...”

Though retired from the administrative frontlines due to his advancing age, all the connections he’d made as a hypercompetent minister meant information continued to find its way to him. Figuring it’d be a waste to let the diligent work of his informants go to waste, he’d recently begun taking some time out of each day to contemplate the current state of the world and the historical currents that had led them there.

“One way or another, it all boils down to the Empress Prelate, doesn’t it? Rafina’s influence upon the world simply cannot be understated.”

Rafina’s Holy Aquarian Army had grown exponentially in power and was now a significant player on the world stage. Its forces swept across the lands, searching for signs of rebellion against their cause. By ferreting out insurgents and placing them under intense surveillance, Rafina had achieved a transient and fragile peace. However, these violent and oppressive methods were met with significant backlash, resulting in the formation of a stubborn resistance that dragged the continent back into widespread war and chaos.

“But the Rafina I knew, when she was still our Holy Lady, was neither daft enough to take actions so lacking in forethought nor vicious enough to commit such tyranny.”

During her early days, when she was Mia’s classmate, Rafina was a good-natured child of exceptional intellect and mental poise. At the time, he’d considered her a remarkable leader every bit the equal of her fellow hero-in-the-making, the Libra King, Sion Sol Sunkland.

“What caused her to change so drastically? What was it that turned her into the Rafina we know and fear today?”

The words were rhetorical, for the answer was clear to him already.

“The Holy Eve Festival... and the mass poisoning.”

The Holy Eve Festival was the most important winter event at Saint-Noel. On that day, an incident of indiscriminate terrorism occurred, dealing a fatal blow to Rafina’s reputation as the Holy

Lady. To be fair, she was deserving of sympathy. At the time, the sheer burden of her endless responsibilities had stretched her to her limit, and she often succumbed to sickness as a result of her unending exhaustion. A lapse in her scrutiny of the festival's security measures was, if not defensible, at least understandable. Furthermore, the enemy's scheme was unprecedented in its scale and ruthlessness.

Gifted though Rafina was, her intelligence failed to transcend to genius; she was smart, but she was no prodigy. Ultimately, she wasn't able to see the full picture of the enemy's intentions. She had, in fact, taken precautions against an assassination attempt. Knowing she was up against a secret society like the Chaos Serpents, she'd naturally arranged for enhanced security for important figures in the academy — including herself — to prevent possible attempts on their lives.

Alas, she'd misread her opponent. Never had she thought the enemy would go after not the students of Saint-Noel, but its servants and staff. She failed to consider the possibility that the sumptuous stew served as a reward for their daily diligence could be poisoned. She failed to consider it because even in her wildest imaginations, she didn't think such cruelty was truly possible — that there could be people who were willing to slaughter countless innocents just to damage her reputation. The enemy set their sights on soft targets, and their approach proved lethally effective.

Normally, nobles wouldn't care no matter how many servants died. The ethos of nobles, after all, was that nobility was the hallmark of humanity and all others were swine. Rafina, however, was no simple noble; she was the Holy Lady of Belluga. Her station conferred upon her the responsibility to extend her care to all people, be they noble, common, or even destitute. Because of that responsibility, the incident took a heavy toll on her name. Criticism was leveled against her for providing impeccable protection for noble students while cutting corners for the servants. In the end, the crystalline reputation of the Holy Lady, once so pure and perfect in its embodiment of integrity and virtue, was left with an ugly scratch — a scratch that proved too much for the overextended Rafina to bear. Seized by bouts of crippling guilt that would assault her night after restless night, she went into a downward spiral. Slowly, she changed, her suffering twisting her guilt into hate, until she completed her metamorphosis into the iron-fisted ruler she was

today.

Determined to flush out the Chaos Serpents hiding among the populace, she implemented draconian measures, leaving no stone unturned and no suspicion unexamined. To her, gray was just as incriminating as black. In order to root them out, all suspect cases were to be nipped in the bud. Her approach was intended to be watertight, allowing not a single collaborator to escape. Once implemented, it should spell the end of the Serpents for good. Or so it seemed...

Ludwig distinctly remembered the time he went to interrogate a Serpent they'd captured in the empire.

"You do realize that what you people did only tightened the noose around your own neck?"

The man met his gaze, his grin almost triumphant.

"The Serpents will never die. Why? Because *this* is what we were after. The world is in the very state we've been working all along to push it toward."

The man's words shook Ludwig to his core. If the goal of the Chaos Serpents was the destruction of order itself... The Empress Prelate's reign of terror was a direct attack on the order established by the Central Orthodox Church. The more she wielded the Church's authority in oppressive ways, the more she forced the people away from its teachings. The concept of "Rule by God," which had provided the basis for the stability and value system of all neighboring regions, was presently being dismantled — and by her very hand, no less. In a few years, Belluga would fall, taking with it the basis by which nearby nations determined fairness and justice. All that would remain was chaos.

"The Chaos Serpents... A secret society aiming to destroy all order..."

Ludwig found that he, in spite of himself, had to acknowledge that the man was right. The world was indeed in chaos.

"But if it had been Her Highness..."

He knew it to be wishful thinking, but still, he couldn't help but wonder.

"Had the Great Sage of the Empire been in a position to apply her resourcefulness, might things have turned out differently? Perhaps not, but if she couldn't do it, then no one could have. Either way, Her Highness was our only hope."

If only the student council president presiding over Saint-Noel's

events at the time had been Mia... Maybe, just maybe, she could have seen through the Serpent's devious scheme and saved the world from disaster...

"If only Her Highness — the Great Sage of the Empire — with all the brilliance of the Moon Goddess, had been there..."

"...Mmph? Mr. Ludwig?"

"Oh, Lady Miabel. I see you've woken up," he said with a tender smile.

"Mmm... Did you say something just now?"

"No, no. It was just the meaningless grumblings of an old man. More importantly, did you sleep well?"

Bel failed to hear most of Ludwig's musings at the time. Consequently, she couldn't relay any detailed information, leaving Mia clueless about both the conspiracy of the Holy Eve Festival and what she should do in place of Rafina to stop it. Ludwig's overzealous expectations, therefore, fell on the shoulders of a princess who had no idea she was even bearing them. And at the moment, she was more concerned with...

"Hmm, campaign promises, campaign promises... Well, let's figure out the complicated ones some other day. For now, I know that the one thing I absolutely want to do is have everyone try some of my homemade mushroom stew during the Holy Eve Festival!"

...Saying things that should fill any sensible person with foreboding.

Side Chapter: A Birthday Party Ten Days Late

Mia's days in the dungeon were, as a rule, very boring. She was naturally provided with no entertainment whatsoever, and there was no hope of striking up an interesting conversation with her guards, who were the kind of people that, on a good day, would give her the silent treatment; the alternative was verbal abuse. As a result...

"Five thousand six hundred and one... Five thousand six hundred and two..."

...She'd resorted to the psychologically questionable activity of counting the number of cracks in the stones that made up her cell. Why the cracks, specifically? Well, she'd already finished counting the number of stones and the number of stains on the stones, so... It was fair to say that she was reaching the limits of her sanity.

"Good day, Your Highness."

Suddenly, she heard something that was a rarity in the dungeon — the charming voice of a young woman.

Huh. Have I finally started hallucinating? she wondered, staring blankly in the direction of the voice.

The familiar figure of her steadfast caretaker appeared.

"My! Anne! What a pleasant surprise!"

It was a cold day near the end of the year. The common populace were busy with wintering over preparations, and there had been no sign of Anne for seven straight days. Three days ago was when Mia had her big cry, figuring that Anne had finally given up on her. She'd been despondent ever since, weighed down by the despair of being abandoned. To have that conclusion overturned filled her with joy, and she grinned ear to ear as she welcomed her longed-for conversation buddy. As Anne got closer, she noticed something wrapped around her neck.

"My, you're wearing something interesting there, aren't you?"

“Hm? Ah, this. Right,” Anne said with a timid laugh. “It’s actually my birthday today.”

She unraveled a length of the scarf around her neck and held it up for Mia to see. The stitches were crude, yielding uneven patterns, and the yarn used was cheap. It was certainly no luxury item, but it was clearly a source of great bliss for her.

“...I’m glad you have such a good family,” said Mia in a soft voice.

She was reminded of her own father, who’d already been put to death. Overprotective and inclined to pamper her to no end, she wasn’t sure how effective he’d been as an emperor, but as a father, he’d always been gentle. The thought left her a little sad, so she discarded it with a shake of her head and changed the topic.

“Speaking of birthdays, I just had mine too.”

“...Huh?” Anne blinked at her in surprise. “Y-Your Highness, it’s your birthday?”

“Was. Seven days ago.” Mia gave Anne an accusatory pout. “You *do* live in the capital, don’t you? Haven’t you ever attended one of my birthday festivals?”

Princess Mia’s natal festival was a massive five-day celebration that took place every winter to celebrate her birth. Back when the empire was still prosperous, seemingly endless stalls would be set up by imperial decree, and great numbers of people both local and foreign would travel to attend the festivities.

“I’m sorry. But I’m always busy in the winter helping out at home, so...” she said in a slightly defensive tone. “Actually, I do remember going to a festival after my sisters badgered me about it, but I didn’t know what it was for...”

“Ah. Well. No matter.” Mia’s expression softened with resignation. “It’s a thing of the past now.”

She thought of those bygone days, their bustling excitement now reduced to wistful nostalgia, and drew her mouth into a tight-lipped smile. A quiet sigh escaped her.

“Back when I was actually involved, I thought it was the most troublesome thing. Now that it’s gone, I have to admit I miss it a little.”

For a brief moment, Anne didn’t say anything, as though she were contemplating something. In the end, she produced only a short response of acknowledgment.

“...I see.”

After that, the topic shifted to other matters. Mia inquired about how Anne's family was doing and what things were like outside. Eventually, the conversation drew to a close, and they parted for the day.

The next time Anne visited was three days later. She entered the dungeon quickly, sneaking uneasy glances at the guards as she walked past them.

"Anne? Is something the matter?"

"Shush. Just act normal, Your Highness," whispered Anne as she made sure she was positioned with her back toward the guard. "I'll do your hair for you today. Could you please turn around?"

She hastily pressed on Mia's shoulders, rotating her so they faced the same direction.

"Hey, wait— What's going on? You don't have to push... Huh?"

Anne ran her fingers through Mia's hair a few times, pretending to straighten it, before reaching over to press something into her hand.

"Is this... a cookie?"

"Yes. I just so happened to come across one."

"My!"

Mia let out a quiet squeal of glee. The great famine that had swept the continent plunged the empire's food situation into a disastrous state. Sweets became extraordinarily scarce, and even Mia, still a princess at the time, was rarely able to procure any. Obviously, after being thrown into a dungeon, the thought of tasting something sweet became nothing but a pipe dream.

"Quickly. If they see it, they'll take it away and eat it themselves."

"Ah, that's true. All right..."

Mia regarded the baked delicacy like a piece of priceless treasure. She held it in both hands. Then, carefully, almost reverently, she brought it to her mouth and took a bite. As the fragment touched her tongue, she felt a dry, sandy texture. Chewing it, however, revealed the sweetness within. It tasted like cheap sugar... but *it was sugar*. Complemented by the attendant aroma of toasted dough and a faint floral flavoring...

"Ahhh..."

...It was like tasting bliss itself — undoubtedly the most delicious thing she'd eaten since being put in this dungeon. As she

savored the moment, exhaling with heartfelt pleasure, she heard Anne say, “Happy birthday, Your Highness.”

“You...” She turned to Anne, her eyes widening. “You brought this because...”

“Yes. I’m sorry it’s ten days late, though.”

There was a long silence.

“...It was quite the ordeal to get one of these, wasn’t it?”

Even Mia knew how difficult it must have been to acquire a cookie in these times. Suddenly, she was seized by a sense of anxious uncertainty. Anne had gone through so much trouble to obtain this cookie. Was it really okay for her to give it to Mia of all people? They weren’t even family.

“It was. But special things always are. And this is for your birthday, so it had to be something special.”

“But still...”

“Otherwise... Well, that’d just be too sad. I can’t stand the thought of someone being unable to celebrate their birthday. I think that everyone born into this world deserves to have their birthday celebrated,” she declared with chest-puffing conviction before sticking out her tongue. “Ehehe, did that sound a little pretentious? I always wanted to try saying something like that.”

Then, she lowered her head and said in a formal tone, “Please forgive my impertinence, Your Highness.”

Her sudden shift in attitude bordered on comedy, and Mia almost spat out her precious mouthful of cookie crumbs on the spot.

Time passed, and lives changed, but Mia never forgot that birthday she celebrated ten days late. She remembered it on the guillotine, and she continued to remember it afterward.

Fast forward(?) to another timeline...

“Sweet moons, am I ever tired.”

An empire-wide natal festival followed by parties at the Four Dukes’ residences kept her on the road for nine straight days, during which she just kept smiling and smiling. By the end, every muscle in her face felt sore.

“Back when it was gone, I thought I missed it, but now that it’s here again, it really is the most troublesome thing.”

Mia, you see, was the type to yearn for winter when it was summer and yearn for summer when it was winter. Spring and fall,

though, had lots of yummy foods, so she didn't do any yearning during those seasons. She had a simple nature, but it kept her happy.

She threw off her dress and flopped down onto the bed, at which point she could have sworn she immediately melted into a puddle of boneless flesh. Within seconds, slumber began calling seductively to her fading consciousness.

"You're going to get sick if you fall asleep like that. Please change into some loungewear, at least," said Anne, her tone equal parts amused and admonishing as she approached.

Mia sluggishly craned her neck enough to glance at Anne, only to find her curiosity piqued by the tray she held.

"Mmm? What's that?"

"It's from the head chef. He expected you to be exhausted, so he sent you this. I think it's something made from hot milk."

"...Is it good?"

"I'm not sure, but he mentioned it's been sweetened with honey."

"Say no more!"

Mia's taste buds were willing to give an A to anything sweet. They were simple things, those taste buds, but they kept her happy, so really, they were the best taste buds. She sat up on the bed, hanging her legs over its side, and picked up the porcelain container on the tray. Steaming hot milk sloshed around inside. As she drew in a breath, a sweet fragrance filled her nose, causing her to let it back out in a gratified sigh.

"By the way, milady, about the rest of the day..."

"Oh, my! I just realized!" exclaimed Mia, cupping her face with her hands in a gesture of exaggerated surprise. "It's your birthday today, isn't it?"

It was honestly a cheesy bit of acting, but it had its intended effect, causing Anne to give her a wide-eyed stare as she produced the present she'd been hiding.

"Huh? What's that?"

"It's a present."

Inside the container were sweets of the highest quality.

"Th-Thank you very much." said Anne.

She was about to say something else, but decided against it at the last second and pressed her lips together. The gesture did not escape Mia's notice.

“Anne? Is something the matter? Actually, let me guess. Your family’s throwing a birthday party for you, so you’d like the rest of the day off?”

“No. It’s, um...” She picked nervously at the hem of her apron for a bit before continuing. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, and I know how big an ask this is, but... is there any chance you’d be willing to come with me?”

“Huh?”

Mia gave her an open-mouthed stare.

“U-Um, I mean, my sisters... They, um, really want you to come celebrate with us, and...”

Anne stole a nervous glance at her, then let out an embarrassed laugh.

“Ahaha, what am I even doing? I’m being silly. You’re so tired already, and... Never mind. I’m sorry I said anything so ridiculous...”

“You’ll always be the girl who celebrated my birthday ten days late. Always,” Mia whispered softly to herself, her eyes closed, as she gripped Anne’s hands tightly in her own.

“Huh? U-Um, milady?”

“Ridiculous indeed. As if there was any need to even ask.” She opened her eyes again and her expression blossomed into a radiant smile. “*Of course* I’ll go. And happily at that.”

A few days later, Mia would ask Anne to accompany her to Saint-Noel Academy, blissfully unaware of what adventures were lying in wait.

Chapter 38: Princess Mia… Becomes an Accomplished Woman…

"Hmmm… Mmm… Hnnnngh…"

Mia's groans reverberated throughout the student council office. As the new president, her first task was to staff the council. Since her actual administrative abilities approached zero, assembling a team of close aids was an urgent priority. Now, were Mia your typical unqualified leader, she'd opt to surround herself with yes-men to ensure that it'd be nothing but smooth sailing during her term in office. However, Mia was *not* typical; she was, in fact, acutely aware of where she stood.

"If I choose the wrong people… I'm going to get the ax!"

She meant it literally too. After all, she sat in a seat that Rafina had willingly given to her. Had she won the election, it would have been possible to blame her failures on the voters for choosing badly, but Rafina had entrusted her with the role, and the *trust* part of entrust was what scared her. If she were to betray Rafina's trust…

"I only barely managed to make her forgive me for what I did at the Cleansing Spring. If I goof up again… Oh, merciful moons…"

She recalled the sight of Rafina with her bloodshot eyes and shuddered. Frankly, she had no idea why Rafina had decided to concede the president's seat to her. The one thing she did know though, was what would happen if she botched her new job. She knew it with visceral certainty; she could feel it in her neck.

"I-I'd better do everything I can to live up to Rafina's expectations… or something very bad is going to happen!"

Therefore, she had to choose carefully to ensure all the seats in the council were filled by the super competent. Basically, she needed a team of Ludwigs. That way, she could just take the steady stream of well-considered proposals they offered up, throw in a few superfluous remarks about their appropriateness, and send them off to be put into action. Her ideal administrative workflow was to have everything work on its own, so all she had to do was stamp

her approval on every recommendation that came her way. Indeed, Mia's goal was not to surround herself with yes-men; it was to *be* the yes-man. Well, yes-girl.

"First things first. I need Rafina to be one vice-president..."

Rather than waiting until she caused an irreparable mess that left everyone mad at her, it'd be better to have Rafina point out her errors early on. This also had the secondary and considerably less laudable effect of allowing her to claim "It was *partly* Rafina's fault too!" for anything that went wrong.

"As for the second one... It's got to be Sion."

Her rationale for appointing (read: implicating) Sion was the same. If it weren't just Tearmoon but also Sunkland that screwed up, who could really give them any flak about it?

"More importantly, there's no way I'm going to let him be the only one who has it easy!"

Mia's modus operandi was all about dragging everyone else in to deal with her problems...

"I'll make Abel the president's assistant so I can keep him near me..."

...While she slyly satisfied her own whims. When it came to *those* matters, Mia took the initiative.

"Then, Tiona can be secretary, I suppose, and as for Chloe... I'll make her the treasurer, since they both helped me a lot during the election."

These appointments were meant as a show of appreciation for their contributions to her election campaign.

"Huh. Somehow, this is becoming the same bunch of faces I see during our anti-Chaos Serpent meetings. Hmm..."

That was when she remembered something.

"Oh, right. I should get Sapphias in here too. I think I'll have him be an assistant to the secretary." A wicked grin spread across her lips. "It's pretty obvious he's connected with the Chaos Serpents, so rather than letting him roam free, I'd be better off putting him right there beside me in the council where I can keep an eye on him. Let's see how he likes being surrounded by anti-Chaos Serpenters. Heh. That ought to keep him squirming..."

Feeling pretty proud of herself for coming up with such a great idea, she started humming a jolly little tune.

"Oh, poor Sapphias. He has no idea what he's in for... I'm going to work him to the bone! He'll be so busy he won't have time to

hatch any evil plots!"

Obviously, it's extremely *not* obvious that Sapphias is in any way connected with the Chaos Serpents, but Mia could not be bothered with such technicalities; she had jolly little tunes to hum!

Rafina readily agreed to assume the role of vice-president, writing back in affirmation as soon as she received Mia's request. It was, in her opinion, an extremely sensible staffing decision that would ensure a smooth transfer of responsibilities.

"And... it might also be a move to stabilize public sentiment?"

The Duke of Belluga's daughter being displaced from the president's seat was already a big deal. If she were absent from the student council entirely, it'd cause too many problems. Granted, it wasn't ideal in terms of lightening her own workload, but she'd still have a significantly easier time being vice-president.

"It's all thanks to Mia that I feel more at ease now, so I don't mind staying around to help her out a little, but..." Her gaze wandered upward as she reflected on Mia's staffing decisions. "I have to say, you're sending out one heck of a message with those choices."

When it came to staffing the student council, it was customary to select students with limited ties to Tearmoon and Sunkland. Mia's roster was almost an open denunciation of that unspoken rule.

"I didn't think she'd choose Prince Sion. And Prince Abel too..."

After the election she'd heard that the two princes had a hand in putting together Mia's platform.

"The two of them helped her with her campaign pledges, so they're asked to assist with their delivery as well. That seems natural enough, I suppose. Then, in a similar vein, Tiona and Chloe, who put in a lot of work during her campaign, are also brought into the council. On the surface, these certainly seem like reasonable appointments. But..." Her eyes narrowed. "This could also be seen as a declaration of sorts to those in the know. That Tearmoon, Sunkland, and Remno are joining forces with Belluga in the fight against the Chaos Serpents."

To Rafina, this seemed like a clear expression of Mia's intent to gather all the members of the anti-Chaos Serpent coalition into the student council, facilitating communication and coordination while they went about their daily lives as students.

"And to cap it all off, she brought *him* in too. Sapphias Etoile

Bluemoon will be a member of the student council…"

She closed her eyes and focused on recalling her prior interaction with Sapphias. Coy and fidgety, the boy's manner had conveyed not dependability or integrity but rather the petty slyness common to small-time cheats and crooks. Frankly, the exchange had left her with a rather unfavorable impression of him.

"He hardly seems like a desirable candidate… but by giving him a chance like this, he'll have no choice but to work his tail off. That, perhaps, is her intention?"

Mia didn't fault him for his past failures and instead promoted him to a position of responsibility. While a confounding decision at first glance… it'd be worth it if it motivated him to rise to the occasion.

"For someone in her position, it's arguable that sooner or later, she'd have to bring in someone from the Four Dukes. In that sense, he might actually be the easiest one to handle."

The discovery that one of the Four Dukes might be connected with the Chaos Serpents had of course been brought to her attention, but she definitely didn't think Sapphias was it.

"Other than that… I suppose this is also a message to the other Tearmoon nobles. And all the other students, really."

This was probably Mia's line in the sand. She was making it clear how much preferential treatment the empire's nobles could expect to receive. Doing absolutely no favors for her fellow countrymen would be seen as bizarre. It was possible for someone in Rafina's position to uphold the highest standards of impartiality, but a princess of the empire becoming student president and appointing none of her own nobles to the council would be exceedingly unnatural. There was of course Tiona, but she'd been supporting Mia since her campaign's inception and was likely to be regarded as a direct subordinate. Someone else had to be selected alongside her to keep up appearances.

"Honestly, it wouldn't even be that strange for her to bring in the children of all Four Dukes, but that's likely to cause some backlash. Appointing just one of them, then… Hm, I see. She's really threading the political needle, isn't she?"

The more she thought about it, the more apparent it became that Mia's decision was based on a careful and comprehensive evaluation of the current political dynamics. She let out a breath of quiet awe.

“So, she can do politics too...”

Rafina bumped up her assessment of Mia, who now sat comfortably on the rung labeled “accomplished woman.”

...Meanwhile, the accomplished woman in question had no idea her perceived level of competence was experiencing significant inflation.

Chapter 39: Mia the Provoker!

With the student council roster finalized, Mia marched eagerly toward Sapphias's room and rapped on his door.

"Sapphias? Are you there?"

She was bright-eyed and confident. The figure that emerged from behind the door was anything but.

"O-Oh, uh, Your Highness..." said Sapphias with the tone and appearance of a man who'd hit rock bottom, and then fallen a couple feet further. "I'm, uh, terribly sorry. My room is a bit of a mess. But, um, if you could give me a few minutes, I'll get it cleaned up right away and, uh—"

Mia silenced his anxious stammering with a solemn shake of her head.

"That will not be necessary. The doorway will suffice, for I am here to inform you, Sapphias, that I have appointed you to the student council as assistant to the secretary."

"...Huh? I'm... What?"

She disregarded the look of complete incomprehension on his face and continued.

"Miss Rafina and Prince Sion will serve as vice-presidents. Prince Abel will serve as assistant to the president. My dear friends Chloe and Tiona will serve as treasurer and secretary respectively."

Assuming he was an accomplice of the Chaos Serpents, he'd doubtlessly be aware of what happened in Remno. It was no secret that Sion and Abel were united against the Chaos Serpents, while Rafina was an enemy of all heretical cults in general. There was also Chloe, who was Mia's close friend. As for Tiona... well, she *did* go to Remno with them, so she at least bumped up the head count. What Mia was implying, in essence, was *I've surrounded you with members of the anti-Chaos Serpent coalition, and they're all keeping a close eye on you, so you'd better tread carefully, you sneaky bastard!* The fact that Sapphias's position made him assistant to Tiona, an outland noble, was just icing on the cake. Petty icing, but icing nonetheless.

With her exposition finished, she proceeded to turn into Mia the Provoker. Put simply, she started taunting him!

"I expect this appointment to be particularly challenging for you, so should you choose to refuse, I'll not hold it against you. With that said, I do believe this to be quite the opportunity..."

She smiled with triumphant smugness at him, as though she'd just soundly trounced him in a fight. When Mia taunted, she went all in!

If Sapphias was a Chaos Serpent, the student council would be enemy territory. He'd be surrounded on all sides and in constant danger. However, it also meant he'd be at the heart of enemy forces, literally sitting in their headquarters. As the saying goes, you can't get the lion cub without entering the lion den. In great peril lay great opportunity.

Mmhmhm. Hard to pass up a chance like this, isn't it? Too bad for you though. Once you join the student council, that'll be it for you. We'll watch you so carefully you won't dare do anything sneaky!

Feeling rather proud of her supposedly inflammatory delivery, she huffed out a satisfied breath and strode off without another word.

"I... I can't believe... that just happened..." whispered Sapphias as he watched Mia go. His legs failed him, and he collapsed to the floor. "Never in a million years... would I have thought that this could be the result..."

Ever since he'd been summoned by Rafina, Sapphias had been holed up in his room. Her icy threats had thoroughly traumatized him, leaving him with a debilitating fear of going outside. Furthermore, the letter from his fiancée weighed heavily on his heart. Once she'd heard — prematurely — that he would be in the student council, she promptly sent him her heartfelt blessings and encouragement.

Dear Lord Sapphias, my future husband,

I am overjoyed to hear that you are so deeply valued by Princess Mia. I feel nothing but endless gratitude toward Her Highness, who perceived and appreciated your talent and potential. It is my honest wish that you will fulfill this important new duty by supporting Her Highness with grace and competence.

After receiving a letter like that, there was no way he was going to tell her he didn't actually get in; that'd be too pathetic. At the same time, he couldn't keep the truth from her forever. Trapped between a rock and a hard place, he languished in his room alone, feeling his will to live slowly draining out of him. Then, just as he was about to fully succumb to his despondency, Mia showed up with her miraculous announcement.

"A-Anyway, I should, uh... Oh, right! A letter! I need to write a letter to my dear heart!"

He hastily sat down at his desk and picked up his pen. As he set it to paper, however, his hand froze.

"'Perceived and appreciated my talent and potential,' huh..."

Sapphias knew that wasn't true. This past week had made him painfully aware of his own inconsequentiality. He was no mastermind; he was but a paltry stooge who had no place on the big stage.

"But even so... Even for someone like me... She was willing to give me a chance."

He'd heard her message loud and clear. Rafina would be there. Tiona, whom he'd looked down on, would be there as well. She'd said that she expected this to be a particularly challenging environment for him, but also that she believed it to be an opportunity.

"Does she have great expectations for me? No, she probably doesn't... But surely, she still has *some* hope in me, however minor it may be... Yes, she hasn't given up on me completely, or she wouldn't have bothered to speak with me in the first place."

He'd have a seat on the student council, but he'd know he didn't earn it himself. Mia gave it to him. It was an act of kindness — kindness that he was equally undeserving of.

"This important new duty of supporting Her Highness... with grace... and competence..."

He'd always thought of such expressions as little more than lip service — flowery formalities with no substance. But now... he felt something behind the words. Something with weight.

"Her Highness preserved my honor. She gave me another chance. For that, I owe her a debt of gratitude. Should I fail to repay it... To live up to her expectations... Then I'll undoubtedly remain a loser for the rest of my life..."

When he finally looked up from the page, his sunken eyes had

gained a faint glimmer of resolve.

The Clair de Lune was a tea party hosted periodically by the Etoilers that convened their children. Attendance was often imperfect, but today one of the frequent absentees happened to be present.

"Well, well, it's not every day that *you* show up," said Esmeralda with a curious look. "I can barely remember the last time I saw you here, Ruby."

"Yeah, been a while, hasn't it, O Lady of Greenmoon?" replied the sporadic attendee with a bold grin and a blithe laugh.

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon, Ruby Etoile Redmoon, kept her flaming red hair trimmed neatly to shoulder length. Her features were sharp and well-shaped, exuding an intrepid charisma that blended masculine handsomeness with feminine beauty. Coupled with her gallant disposition, she often found herself receiving dreamy looks from her female classmates.

She scanned the room, her gaze cool and crisp, before lifting an eyebrow.

"Hm? Just you here today? Where's the young scion of Bluemoon?"

The question drew a pouty "Hmph!" out of Esmeralda.

"Busy with student council work, apparently."

"Ah, that's right. The council convened and he had to answer the call of duty. What about Lady Yellowmoon then? She started school this year in Saint-Noel, didn't she?"

"Yellowmoon? You mean those good-for-nothings who only held on to their prestige because of pure luck? Please, we all know the yellows are the oldest and weakest of all. I couldn't care less whether she shows up or not."

"Sure, but it beats having a one-woman tea party, doesn't it?" quipped Ruby as she sat down opposite Esmeralda. "Well, might as well have a cup for myself since I'm here."

"Oh? Today's just full of surprises, isn't it? I thought for sure you were going to just say hey and leave."

"Eh, Father'll get angry at me if I skip too many of these." Ruby shrugged helplessly. "Have to say though, sure didn't see that coming from Her Highness. From announcing that she's running for student council president to making Miss Rafina drop out of the race at the last minute, the whole sequence of events was just one

jaw-dropper after another. Wonder what's gotten into her?"

She took a sip from the cup that had been set down in front of her and let out a sigh of pleasure.

"Perujin black, I assume? Those Perujins sure know how to make some quality tea. I guess being descended from serfs has its perks."

"Hmph, who cares where it's produced?" said an increasingly petulant Esmeralda. "All that matters is that whatever is delivered to me is always of the highest quality. Where it comes from is of no concern."

"Hm? Is it just me or are you in a bit of a mood? What, did Mia becoming student council president rub you the wrong way?"

"No, it did not rub me in any way. I don't care for it." She paused for a second before adding, "That said, I do think she has *terrible* judgment."

"Terrible judgment? How so?"

"Well, how can anyone with good judgment pick an incompetent dolt like Sapphias over me? And not just him, but a country bumpkin like Tiona Rudolvon too. It's unforgivable. Ugh, I can't even... This is so terribly upsetting."

Her hands shook with anger, sending little ripples across the surface of her tea.

"Hey, some honest advice for you. Don't stir up too much trouble, okay? Not that I'll stop you if you try, but yeah."

"Oh? You won't stop me if I try?"

"Nope. I, for one, do not appreciate it when a knight I have my eyes on is poached right out from under me." She smiled at Esmeralda, though there was no humor in the expression. "Point is, you're not the only one who has a gripe with the princess."

And so, the young successors of the Four Dukes, each with their own motives and calculations, began to put their respective plans into motion.

Chapter 40: Gathered Again...

Mia sat in Saint-Noel's famed Secret Garden at the invitation of Rafina to have lunch together. Surrounded by the deep pink petals of the princess roses, she luxuriated in their elegant fragrance while appreciating the fine food Rafina had prepared for her.

"This is really tasty, Miss Mia!" exclaimed the diminutive figure beside her.

As a matter of fact, Rafina's invitation had extended to Bel and Anne as well, and all three of them were enjoying the particularly sumptuous lunch. Bel especially was a ball of enthusiasm. The sight of her distended cheeks and wide grin as she chomped on her food drew a giggle out of Rafina.

"Gosh, now aren't you just the most adorable thing. The food looks twice as good when you're eating it," Rafina said as she regarded the young girl.

"Ehehe, I can't help it. It's just too tasty."

The two traded smiles before Bel went back to assaulting her plate while Rafina watched fondly from across the table. It was a scene that caused some cognitive dissonance for Mia, who until very recently had been under the impression that Bel found Rafina as terrifying as she did.

This girl really knows how to get along with people, doesn't she? Maybe she'll have an easier time than I thought... It occurred to her that people always wore gentle smiles when they interacted with Bel. *Age-wise, she should be just a year younger than Abel and Sion, but for some reason, everyone treats her like a little kid.*

"Say, Mia," Rafina said suddenly as she turned toward her. "Bel is someone very dear to you, right?"

"Of course. She's my precious gra—" She choked the word back just before it could leave her mouth. "Uh, little sister."

"Oh? Was that a moment's hesitation I just heard? Quite the rarity, coming from you, Mia. Mmhmhm... I see you care very much about your father," remarked Rafina, who thought Miabel was the emperor's illegitimate child. It wasn't her fault, of course; Mia had

pushed her toward that theory.

So she believes I'm jealous because Father went and had another kid with someone else... The fact that she thinks that is a little upsetting, actually.

She didn't hate her father or anything, but she didn't want people to think she liked him all that much either. It was... complicated. Puberty and all that. Anyway.

"So, what about Bel?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that if she's someone you hold dear, we should definitely arrange for her to have a proper attendant. Otherwise, we might end up accidentally giving the Serpents a chance to get their hands on her."

"An attendant... for me?"

Bel gave her a puzzled look.

"Yes. I do think it's a bit too much work for Anne to keep taking care of you as well."

"Well, Miss Bel can handle a lot of things on her own, so it's really not much of a burden for me," said Anne, "but I do regret being unable to attend classes with milady..."

That's right. You have no idea how many times I've wished Anne were with me.

Mia was very much in agreement that the best solution was to assign Bel a trustworthy attendant of her own. She'd been toying with the idea herself, in fact. The problem was that she'd never been able to find a fitting candidate.

If Rafina has someone in mind though, I suppose— Ah!

A concern occurred to her, and she hastily spoke up.

"Even if we find an attendant, I'd like for Bel to stay in my room."

"Hm? Isn't it cramped in there?"

It... was sort of cramped, actually, but ensuring Bel was always available for questioning was a higher priority for Mia.

"We're doing fine. It's no problem. There are plenty of things I'd like to talk to her about too, so..."

"Gosh," said Rafina with a surprised giggle, "you really spoil her, don't you?" Then, she put a finger to her chin and frowned. "But, hmm. In that case, I suppose I'll arrange for Bel to stay in your room for the foreseeable future."

"Thank you very much for your consideration."

"Now then, about that attendant for Bel. As a matter of fact, I

have someone in mind...”

“Oh? Who might that—”

Rafina clapped twice. At the signal, a girl appeared before them.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you again, Princess Mia.”

“Oh my! Well if isn’t Lynsha! It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other!”

The unexpected reunion brought a smile to Mia’s face. The last she’d seen of Lynsha had been at the end of the incident in Remno, and that had been several months ago. She’d heard that with Abel and Rafina appealing on her behalf, she’d been spared any harsh penalties, but it was still comforting to see her doing well in person.

“I’m glad to see that you’re in good health.”

“I, as well as my brother, were endlessly fortunate to have been graced by your benevolence and mercy. We appreciate it with all our hearts and hope you’ll accept our sincerest gratitude.”

Lynsha lowered her head in a very formal bow.

“My, what an uncharacteristically deferential attitude... What’s gotten into you?”

Mia regarded her with a puzzled frown. The Lynsha she remembered had been considerably more casual in her speech.

“U-Um, nothing? I just thought... I mean, you’re the princess of Tearmoon, so I can’t afford to be disrespectful...”

“Disrespectful?” Mia chuckled. “If I didn’t give you a hard time after your buddies put me to sleep and kidnapped me, I certainly am not going to do so now because you’re not using enough big words. Please, don’t bother with the fancy language. It gives me the creeps when you talk like that.”

Mia’s joking tone caught Lynsha by surprise, and she froze for a second. Then, after glancing at Rafina for confirmation, she shrugged and said, “All right. If you say so.”

“Now then. I assume this means you’re going to be Bel’s attendant? That sounds wonderful. Thank you very much for taking up this task.”

She blushed a little at Mia’s frank appreciation and hurriedly replied, “No, thank *you*. Having the chance to study in Saint-Noel is a dream come true.”

Lynsha was definitely no friend of the Chaos Serpents. That made her more trustworthy. Furthermore, the adversity they’d overcome together in Remno had established a personal rapport

between them.

"Mmhmhm, Lynsha was so happy to be able to help you, Princess Mia," said Rafina, "that she accepted the job on the spot."

"Wait, wha— M-Miss Rafina!"

Mia enjoyed a hearty laugh at the expense of the flustered Lynsha before turning to Bel.

"Bel, this is Lynsha. She's from the Kingdom of Remno, and she helped me out a lot in the past."

"Really? Nice to meet you, Lynsha. My name is Miabel, but please call me Bel. Miss Mia is my gra—"

"Sister. As an illegitimate child of my father, her circumstances can't be made public, but she is indeed my little sister."

"Got it. I won't pry."

Rafina quietly waited for them to finish before saying with a polite smile, "Wonderful. It's decided then. Before we move on though, there's one more person I'd like to introduce to you. Monica? Come in, please."

At her signal, a lady in a maid uniform appeared.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Princess Mia. I am Monica Buendia."

"...Monica? Oh, might you be the one who was with Abel?"

She recalled hearing the name before. Which was an impressive feat in and of itself.

I'm pretty sure... she's the one that made Abel grin a little when he told me about her.

Hearing Abel happily talk about some woman she didn't know had made her a little jealous at the time.

Hmph, so you're *Monica. Huuuuh. Well then. Abel has a thing for older women, I see!*

She regarded the woman with subdued disgruntlement as her cheeks began to resemble an overly gluttonous chipmunk.

"You did us an immense favor at the time, Princess. Thanks to you, my fellow agents were granted clemency."

"Oh, let me assure you that the sentiment is mutual. Had it not been for you, Remno would surely have faced a much worse fate."

She quickly deflated her cheeks and put on a polite smile.

Hmph! I won't let you take Abel from me! I swear it!

On the inside, however, the gloves had already come off.

Thus, through Rafina's arrangements, those who opposed the

Chaos Serpents continued to gather. At the same time, a message for Mia would arrive from the empire. As for its contents...

Chapter 41: Mia the Professional Question-Asker

"Now then, let the student council be convened. Since this is our inaugural meeting, let's consider this a simple meet-and-greet."

Smiling cordially, Mia acknowledged the figures gathered in the room, her gaze shifting from person to person and finally settling on the object of greatest interest to her — the plates of exquisite sweets arranged in a circle on the table. Her smile grew wider.

"And... since we already know each other perfectly well, let's move on to cutting the cake—"

"Excuse me, President Mia," interjected a politely smiling Rafina, "but I believe there is value in observing such customs, even if it's a mere formality."

Mia gulped back the rest of her sentence.

"T-True. Well, in that case, let's take turns briefly introducing ourselves and what we hope to accomplish in the student council..."

Thus began the meeting in earnest with Mia starting things off, followed by Rafina, Abel, and Sion. After the geopolitical equivalent of the Fantastic Four each delivered a concise and articulate description of themselves, Chloe and Tiona followed up with two more that were a tad diffident but still graceful. Last was Sapphias, whose face was rigid with nervous tension.

"I am deeply humbled and greatly honored to be invited to participate — however limited my capacity may be — in an association as prestigious as this. Though I fear I am unworthy of such privilege, as the most junior member present, I will nevertheless do everything in my power to live up to Her Highness's expectations and ensure that her trust in me does not prove misplaced."

After making the most stilted introduction of the group, he sat back down without pomp or pretense. Mia glanced at him with mild surprise.

Huh. That was actually a pretty sincere introduction. I guess even a

Chaos Serpent wouldn't just show up and declare war immediately.

That was about as far as she got in terms of focused observation before the presence of cakes in front of her again dealt a knockout blow to her concentration.

"Right then. Now that we're done with the formalities, let's—"

"Indeed. Let's help ourselves to a bit of tea and cake while we discuss the budget."

"...Eh?"

Mia liked the first part, but she definitely didn't intend on doing it *with* the second part.

"We've gathered here all the estimates and requests that each club has submitted regarding their portion of the year's budget," continued Rafina. "Let's go over them and come up with a rough framework."

"Huh? U-Um, Miss Rafina? Shouldn't we, you know... Leave that for later?"

Leave the *budget* for later, she meant.

"Oh, having a quick bite won't get in the way of our talking. After all, when it comes to difficult things like working out numbers, sweets are of the essence, aren't they?" Rafina smiled and shook an encouraging fist at her. "Let's focus and get this finished."

The room's atmosphere had clearly been swayed by Rafina's pep talk. Defeated by the grammatical ambiguity of her own suggestion, Mia had no choice but to comply.

"R-Right, it's not much of a distraction, is it? I-I do want to get the budget over with quickly, too. Ohoho. Let's get down to business then."

Her shoulders sagged, and she let out a surreptitious sigh as her fellow council members began their discussion. Mia, for her part, mostly kept to listening as she carefully snuck glances at the others. Whenever she noticed any hint of confusion on any of their faces, she'd immediately chime in with a question regarding the subject matter in question.

"Excuse me, Miss Rafina, but what exactly does this mean?"

Mia, you see, was aware of the importance of asking questions. Back in the previous timeline when she'd been working with Ludwig to deal with the numerous issues of the empire, she'd learned the hard way not to let questions stay questions. Allowing conversations to proceed uninterrupted through things she didn't understand often resulted in a severe scolding down the line. Time

after time, she'd be left sniffling after a frustrated Ludwig castigated her for doing things she didn't understand and bungling the job.

Of course, it'd also be a problem if she kept asking extremely basic questions. There was an art to it; she had to ask only the questions that needed to be asked, or she risked eroding people's trust in her competence. In this case, the barometer she used for determining the necessity of a question was the faces of the other members. Not just any member though. Sion was a lost cause — she wasn't sure if his face was even capable of expressing incomprehension. Abel she thought of as smart and capable as well, so she similarly avoided using him as a reference. As for Chloe... something about her told Mia she was probably good with numbers, so she was out too. That left Tiona and Sapphias. Anything they didn't understand was probably a reasonably difficult concept that warranted clarification. Therefore, whenever their brows furrowed in confusion, Mia would interrupt with a relevant question, then jot down both the issue and its answer.

...And Mia, as it turns out, was actually very good at asking questions. Returning again to the previous timeline, over and over again, she'd end up on the receiving end of Ludwig's merciless snark. So bitter was the experience, in fact, that it was forever burned into her memory.

"It's fine to ask questions, but please stop thoughtlessly asking everything that comes into your mind."

"It's clear that you don't even know what you don't know. Stop asking vague questions. You need to be more specific."

Over and over again, she'd be reduced to a sniffling mess, teeth gritted in frustration and struggling to hold back tears as she suffered her admonishment. The Ludwig school of hard knocks, however, did do one good thing — it conferred upon her the ability to ask questions like a pro.

That's right! Mia had matured into someone who *did* know what she didn't know. It was one small step for mankind, perhaps, but one giant leap for Mia!

Meanwhile, Rafina, who'd been observing Mia this whole time...

Mia... You're really serious about training Tiona and Sapphias, aren't you?

...Found herself filled with heartfelt admiration for her friend. She'd noticed that ever since they began their discussion, Mia had

been taking notes while paying close attention to the other two in question. Whenever something seemed like it wasn't making sense to them, she'd ask simple questions to help them understand. Even though Rafina had a firm grasp on the topics she was talking about, it was still difficult for her to explain them to others in an easily digestible way. Mia, meanwhile, was attempting the far trickier task of asking targeted questions that would prompt Rafina to explain exactly what it was that the others weren't understanding — and succeeding at it.

She avoided denting their pride but still infused them with knowledge. Masterful, Mia. Truly masterful.

Within Rafina, the speculative bubble of Mia's greatness continued to grow. One could only hope that it would not eventually burst, causing the entire Mia-sconception economy to crash.

Some time after the conclusion of the student council meet-and-greet came a day when Anne and Lynsha were busy coordinating the handover of their job responsibilities, leaving Mia alone with Bel. Figuring it was a good chance to find out more about the future, she broached the subject with Bel, who scratched her head and said, "Oh, in that case, you should probably read the 'Princess Mia Chronicles.'"

"...Why do I feel like I've heard of that before?"

She distinctly remembered seeing such a book mentioned in a paragraph of some history book she found in the library.

"...Princess Mia Chronicles, you say."

"Yes. It's an account of my grandmother's life written by Mother Elise."

According to Bel, when she woke up in the library, she quickly hid the book in the stacks so it wouldn't be burned.

"I see. Hiding a tree in the forest, huh..."

At her prompting, the two of them made their way to the library.

"This way."

Once there, Bel led her straight to the back, stopping in front of a shelf of books. It was the same shelf where she'd found the history book. Removing a number of thick tomes revealed a particularly weathered book that had been hidden behind them.

"There it is."

Bel pulled it out and showed it to Mia. Though badly worn, the cover still proudly displayed its title — Princess Mia Chronicles. When she took it in her hands, a chill ran up her spine. It was as if an invisible miasma were emanating from the book, and she suddenly had a very bad feeling about what she was about to do. She *really* didn't want to read the thing, but she'd come too far to simply bail. So, fighting down her gut's desperate protests, she placed her hands on the book, steeled herself, and flipped it open.

She gasped so hard she almost passed out on the spot!

"Th-This is..."

Her horrified eyes bore witness to paragraph upon flowery paragraph of hair-raising, skin-crawling hyperbole that sang her praises. With every turn of the page, the adulation got more excessive, and her face grew more red — whether from shame or the breath she was still holding, she didn't know — and she had the distinct sensation of her insides turning to jelly from shame. It was honestly a little scary. Finally, she regained enough control over her faculties to exhale and produce a coherent thought.

"H-Huh... This Mia person is, uh, quite something, isn't she? It's almost as if she's a character from some made-up story."

That was the only comment her still-recovering mind could muster.

"Ahaha, you're so funny, Miss Mia. Of course she's not made up. She's standing right here," said Bel, regarding Mia with the look of someone who definitely failed to differentiate between fiction and reality.

How in the moons is it even possible to think a person like this exists?! she thought, bewildered by the accounts in the book that depicted... some sort of superhero. Or maybe a mythological demigod. Whatever it was, it definitely wasn't real-life Mia.

According to the Princess Mia Chronicles, this legendary individual named Mia Luna Tearmoon was a voracious reader who, ever since early childhood, had devoured over a dozen books a day, and her boundless wisdom allowed her to see hundreds or even thousands of years into the future. Faced with an empire teetering on the brink of financial ruin, she made sweeping policy changes to restore economic stability. Noble, honest, and unconcerned with material wealth, her virtuous character charmed even the winged horse of legend, who offered itself as her mount. She rode it with skill and grace, horse and rider twirling as one through the air in a

dance as mesmerizingly beautiful as the moon goddess herself.

This... This is such nonsense! Everything except the mesmerizingly beautiful part is a complete lie! she thought, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the account's falsehoods in a way that betrayed no awareness of the inherent irony.

And there's more, like this part where it says I'm drowning at sea while being attacked by a megalodon, and I vanquish it by punching it in the nose?! I mean, like, what*?!*

That wasn't even a feat of wisdom. She literally just flexed on a shark. As in, with pure muscle. Granted, sharks did have a lot of sensory organs concentrated near their nose, so knowing to smack it there was arguably a display of knowledge. Still, it was clearly a fictional account — the result of unbridled exaggeration. How did she know? Well, first of all, she couldn't even swim.

It's going to be a big problem if Bel thinks I'm some sort of superhuman like in this book.

"I'll hold on to this," she said, taking the book. "A book this dangerous, I can't afford to have just lying around."

It'd be a disaster if someone else got a peek at it.

That kind of humiliation would be fatal.

The last thing she wanted was for a new proverb to be created — embarrassment killed the princess. So, with the book held tight to her chest, she quickly made for the exit. The librarian stopped her before she left, but she freed herself from further questioning by claiming she was retrieving a book she previously forgot in the library. Reviewing the records showed no matching title, which lent credence to her claim. Her heart did skip a beat when the librarian glanced at the cover though.

"I swear, there's something about a book having my name in its title that just feels *wrong*. I'd better have a word with Elise later..." muttered Mia as she walked back to her room.

"My?"

Upon arriving, she discovered a girl standing in front of her door.

The girl noticed her and curtsied.

"Ah, Princess Mia. How do you do?"

Her tanned skin, which radiated a healthy sheen, and jet black hair were characteristic traits of the people living in a country south of Tearmoon. Mia remembered her deep green eyes and charming

smile.

"My, Miss Rania. You've certainly traveled a long way."

Mia politely smiled back at the third princess of Perujin Agricultural Country, Rania Tafrif Perujin.

Now, a quick reminder, seeing as things have grown rather convoluted... Mia followed two guiding principles that dictated how she lived her life at Saint-Noel. The first was to stay away as much as possible from people who were associated with her gruesome fate at the guillotine. The second was to make connections with people who might prove useful in avoiding a repeat of said gruesome fate. The first had been bent so badly it was starting to crack, but she still had every intention of abiding by the second. The person before her, Rania, happened to be a rare case of her connection-making efforts actually paying off.

"In any case, come in."

Chapter 42: Mia Knows that Cake and Bread are Both Made From Wheat

Perujin Agricultural Country was located to the southeast of the Tearmoon Empire. Consisting mostly of farmland, Perujin was largely inhabited by people who worked in agriculture, making them a prime target of ridicule for many Tearmoon nobles, who looked upon the populace as the descendants of serfs and the country as a mere vassal state of the empire.

Not Mia, though. Mia knew that if imports of agricultural produce from Perujin stopped, Tearmoon would immediately be faced with a crisis. She also knew that in dire times, the most valuable thing wasn't beautiful silk or precious gems; it was crops. Crops that could be turned into food to fill empty stomachs.

That's right, I know... I know that bread and cake are actually both made from wheat!

Never again would she tell people to eat cake when they have no bread. She'd done that in the previous timeline and was treated to a profoundly contemptuous glare from Ludwig. She had no intention of repeating the experience. It followed, then, that she'd display the utmost respect toward Rania. When it came to a princess from Perujin, there was no room for a lapse in courtesy.

"Please excuse my unannounced visit, Princess Mia. I'm terribly sorry for imposing upon you so suddenly."

"It's no matter. The only problem is that Anne is out at the moment, so I can't offer you some tea..."

At that, Bel perked up.

"Ah, Miss Mia, let me go get her, then."

"Oh? How nice of you to do that, Bel."

"Ehehe."

Mia regarded the enthusiastic grin on Bel's face for a second, and then it clicked.

Aha. So that's it. The girl's had a thing for sweetened hot milk lately. Drinking too much of it is probably bad for her, so Anne's been

cutting her off. I bet she intends to use this as a chance to get a cup for herself. The sneaky little rascal, I wonder who she gets it from...

Despite seeing through Bel's scheme, she didn't stop her from going. The reason was simple; Mia wanted some, too. Thus formed an impromptu alliance in which grandmother and granddaughter plotted together to circumvent the watchful eye of Anne.

Rania watched as Bel nodded politely at her before leaving the room. Then she giggled.

"How adorable. Was that your sister?"

"Uh, yes, you could say that, I guess. Anyway, what brings you here today?"

Mia motioned for Rania to sit down before pulling a chair out for herself across the table. There was a brief span of silence after they were both seated, during which Rania seemed to chew over her thoughts before voicing them.

"It's... about my older sister, actually. The second princess."

"The second princess, you say..."

Mia gave her head a curious tilt as she began searching through her mental filing cabinet.

Rania's second older sister... What was her name again? Uhhh... I think it started with A? Or maybe B? Wait... C? D? E? After exhausting her alphabetical choices, she decided she was right the first time. *It was definitely A. Yes, her name started with A. A... A...*

"A... Arshia Tafrif Perujin? I believe?"

"Yes. I'm honored that you know about her," said Rania with an exuberant smile.

Mia smiled back, feeling equally exuberant. The experience of accurately recalling a name from long ago was profoundly satisfying, akin to scratching a longstanding itch.

Ludwig did say it's important to make an effort to remember things. I think he's got a point.

If nothing else, it could at least help her ward off indolence-induced early-onset senility.

"My sister Arshia spent six years here at Saint-Noel, learning as much as she could about her specialty. She studied her heart out, all because she wanted to make her country more prosperous. But Father made no attempt to recognize her efforts. He said he'd rather find a nation that could further Perujin's interests and marry her off there to improve relations with them..."

"Hmm, I see."

Such arrangements were by no means rare. It was the norm for marriages among royalty. The nation's future was a persistent consideration while sifting through the aristocrats of foreign — and preferably more affluent — kingdoms for desirable mates. This was, by and large, how they approached marriages, and it was certainly a more prevalent mindset than attempting to further national interest through one's own skills or academic prowess.

Hm... I mean, I can certainly see where her father's coming from. It's quite understandable. Which means...

The fact that Rania showed up here was definitely a sign of trouble. She could smell it in the air. Her eyes narrowed and she shot a wary glance at her Perujin guest.

"Well, you've certainly told me a lot about your sister. I presume there is some reason you did so?"

"She tried so hard. I just don't want her efforts to go to waste. Is there some way you can... maybe speak to Miss Rafina? And ask if my sister can work at Saint-Noel? If she can prove her worth here, she might be able to get Father to reconsider."

Aha. I figured this would be about something like that.

Mia crossed her arms and let out a long *hmph* of contemplation. Her relationship with Rania was undoubtedly something she valued, and she honestly wanted to lend her a helping hand. However, it would be folly for her to do so and earn the Perujin king's resentment as a result.

If I want to help Rania with this, I'll have to figure out some way to prevent the Perujin king from thinking badly of me along the way...

"I can certainly speak to Miss Rafina. That's no problem, but..." she murmured, her tone pensive, before looking up at Rania. "By the way, what did your sister study here?"

"Oh, she specialized in botany. I know my opinion isn't the most objective, but I really do think she's very good at it. All her grades were excellent."

"Botany, you say... I see..."

It would be a good deal later when Mia would recall those words of Rania's and realize their relevance. At the present moment, her thoughts were interrupted by the return of Bel, who arrived with some steaming hot milk. And as if that wasn't distracting enough, Anne would then appear soon after, panic clear on her face and a letter from the empire clutched tightly in her hand.

Chapter 43: Return to Lunatear

The message Anne brought was from Ludwig.

Counsel required regarding academy city project. Return to empire at earliest convenience.

That was all it said.

"My, a request from Ludwig to see me? How curious."

Ludwig, being the exceptionally competent person he was, generally avoided troubling Mia with his work. Once in a while, he might ask Mia for permission to use her name for something, and she'd always authorize his request without a second thought — well, to be completely honest, without a first thought either. After all, it had always been her goal to be a model yes-man. It does make one wonder what would happen if it had been a less scrupulous person making the requests, but anyway...

Arriving with the message was a detachment of the Princess Guard — more of Ludwig's prudent efficiency — that was standing by at the lake shore. With her escort already prepared, Mia was able to depart for Tearmoon the following day. Accompanying her were Anne and Bel, along with Bel's newly appointed attendant, Lynsha.

"I'm sorry, Lynsha. I know you were looking forward to studying at Saint-Noel..." said Mia.

Lynsha shrugged.

"It's part of the job. Besides, I've never been to Tearmoon, so I consider this to be a learning experience, too."

Thus the four girls set out, their carriage flanked by a squad of guards as it trundled apace toward the empire.

"So he wants to talk to me about the academy city project, huh... Last I heard, construction had already started on the building itself, and the plan was to have students begin their classes in the summer. I wonder if something happened."

Mia scratched her head before pulling out the Princess Mia Chronicles. Figuring she'd have plenty of time to analyze its contents during the carriage trip home, she'd brought the book with

her, and this seemed like a perfect time to do so. It wasn't really the kind of thing she should be letting others see arbitrarily, but she decided — arbitrarily, of course — that she could get away with reading it in front of her three carriage companions. Any excuse she made up should be enough to deflect their inquiries.

"Hey, what's that you're reading, Princess Mia?"

Lynsha was the first to express interest, craning her neck curiously toward the book.

"Oh, this? Well, this happens to be—"

Had she gotten to finish her sentence, she would have said the first thing to come to mind, which was "some foreign kingdom's book I borrowed from the library." As it happened, Bel beat her to the punch.

"Mmmhmhm. That, you see, is a book detailing the glorious accomplishments of my wonderful sister, Mia! It's called the Princess Mia Chronicles!" she declared with a proud grin.

"Wha—?!"

Mia stared at her granddaughter, dumbfounded by the sudden interjection. The conversation, however, paid her no mind and continued on without her input.

"Princess Mia Chronicles, huh..." said Lynsha in a thoughtful tone. "Oh, do you mean some foreigner just decided to write the thing and publish it, so we got a copy for ourselves to investigate? Good idea. It's certainly wise for royalty to know what the masses are saying about them. Hm..."

"As a matter of fact, the person who wrote it is Miss Mia's court author, Moth— Miss Elise," explained Bel, who was becoming increasingly talkative.

"Really?" Anne quirked a curious brow. "That girl, when did she have the time to write something like that?"

Meanwhile, Lynsha's lips curled in a surreptitious smirk as if to say "So, you got your own court author to write a book that sings your praises, huh? And then, while we're all watching, you decide to flip open the thing and read it in plain sight? Seriously? Are you some kind of braggart?"

The sheer ridicule in her gaze caused Mia to squirm in her seat.

"U-Ugh... Please! No more! Don't look at me like that!"

She buried her face in her hands and shook her head, wishing she could somehow erase herself from existence. As it turns out, the proverbs did indeed ring true; just as curiosity killed the cat,

embarrassment could very well kill the princess.

Th-That's it! This book is now officially dangerous goods! It needs to be handled with extreme care!

Having decided that it was a terrible idea to read it in front of Lynsha, she asked the two attendants to move themselves to the driver's box under the pretense of asking them to hash out arrangements for the night's food and lodging with the guards. Once she was alone with Bel in the carriage, she flipped open the Chronicles again, but not before giving her chatty granddaughter a good dressing-down. Only then did she turn her attention back to the book, whereupon she immediately frowned.

Huh... That's strange. Is it just me or does this passage seem a little different from the last time I read it... Ah!

With a start, she identified the offending section. Or rather, the lack of it.

"Bel, just to confirm, I do eventually build a college town in the Tearmoon Empire, don't I?"

"You mean Saint-Mia Academy? Of course."

Mia had to keep herself from doubling over. There was a name that packed a punch.

"Uh... What academy?"

"Saint-Mia Academy. It's in your personal domain, next to the Sealence Forest, and it's the most prestigious school in the empire. They conduct research into all sorts of subjects there."

"Ah... Well, the questionable naming aside, that does sound like the thing I'm thinking of." Resisting the urge to spew some venom at the idiot who thought "Saint-Mia Academy" was a reasonable name, she continued. "Which makes it all the stranger. There's no mention of that school in the Chronicles."

With a name like that, there was no way it wouldn't earn at least a mention in the book, but no matter how many times she flipped through it, the school was nowhere to be found.

"Huh? That can't be right. It has to be there. I remember reading it."

Bel leaned over and scanned the offending page before letting out a surprised cry of her own.

"Huh? But... Huh? How come? That's so weird."

Rather than share in Bel's confusion, Mia instead calmed, having deduced the cause of the mystery through her reaction.

Chances are, this is the same phenomenon as the diary and that

history book. Some triggering event caused its contents to be rewritten. Hm? Wait... Bel's memories seem to be intact. Does that mean the phenomenon doesn't affect memories? Or maybe there's a delay to when the memories get altered?

Unlike words on a page, memories did seem like the kind of thing that took time to reform.

Hmm... So many questions. She pursed her lips. *What in the moons does this all mean, I wonder?*

With her brows furrowed in concentration, she thought and thought... and then thought some more. At the end of her mentally arduous journey, she arrived at a truth.

That reminds me. Bel showed up here as the answer to my prayers for guidance, right? That means by comparing the changing accounts in the Princess Mia Chronicles to Bel's unchanging memory, I can figure out all sorts of things! That must be what this is all about!

Her conclusion had nothing to do with the how and why of the bizarre phenomenon she was faced with. Rather, she approached it from a completely different angle — what it *meant* for Bel and the Chronicles to be in the same place at the same time. It was a display of creative thinking that definitely had nothing to do with a desire to avoid thinking about complicated questions. That's right. This was originality! Ingenuity at work! At no point did she have any thoughts to the effect of *Why bother thinking about things I can't figure out? All that does is make me tired. It's not like I can ask anyone about it anyway, so I don't even need to figure out what I know and what I don't. As long as I have an answer I'm happy with, I'm good to go.*

Again, it was not an abdication of thought. To think so would do her a great disservice. Anyway...

"Also, there's that new strain of wheat."

"Huh? New strain of wheat?" Bel looked at her with wide, clueless eyes. "Uh... I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

She blinked in surprise, then, nodded in understanding.

I see... So in the future that Bel's from, the academy exists but the new strain of wheat never got developed. I guess we somehow managed to get through the famine with the food we stocked up, along with some help from Chloe's company, but...

Mia sank deep into thought, and the sounds of her surroundings faded into the background. The road to Tearmoon was yet long, and her contemplative spell would endure for quite some time.

Dion Dreams

Part A: Vestigial Dreams Unfading

Once upon a time, there was a knight known as the empire's finest. His name was Dion Alaia, and he served the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, as one of her most trusted vassals, utilizing his peerless skills to their full potential. Alas, after his master succumbed to the ravages of poison, he resigned from the army and disappeared without a trace. Thus, the "Reaper," hailed as a demon both on and off the battlefield, feared for his prowess by friend and foe — a veritable pillar of his realm and era — vanished from the stage of history. His enduring absence was confounding to many, persisting even through the civil war that rent the empire in two. Dion Alaia, one whose name had become synonymous with violence and bloodshed, who purportedly craved a good fight more than either sleep or nourishment, seemed to have disavowed himself of conflict entirely and retreated to a life of secluded obscurity.

His return to the worldly stage would occur in the form of a fierce clash on the southern side of the Tearmoon Empire when, while accompanying the last princess of the imperial lineage Miabel Luna Tearmoon, he fought tooth and nail to defend her from the cavalry of the Holy Aquarian Army as it swept rapidly northward. It would go down in history as the Battle of Lunant Bridge.

And it would be where the "Reaper" made his last stand.

Tucked away in a corner of the Berman Viscounty's capital was a small tavern. Despite its shabby interior, which bordered on dilapidated in places, business was brisk. Juxtaposed against the dingy ambience was the boisterous drinking of many men. Their silvering hair spoke to their age, while the various scarred cheeks and prosthetic eyes marked them as veterans of the battlefield. To a man, the old soldiers were armor-clad, their leathers and plates showing the unmistakable signs of long-standing service.

Suddenly, the tavern's doors swung open. An old man stepped through its frame, twin swords hanging from his waist. The eyes peering through his wizened lids lacked not for sharpness, and the simple silence of his standing form was enough to impart an imposing air that pressed on their flesh as surely as any physical pressure. Instinctive vigilance was apparent in his stance — the hallmark of an experienced warrior, and his entrance elicited a round of cheers from the aged tavern-goers.

"Hey, Captain Dion! Showed up at last, eh? Figured you would! Been a damn long while! We've missed you something fierce!"

The twin-sworded veteran rolled his eyes at the glib greeting.

"Well I'll be damned. I thought for sure the civil war would have done you old bone-sacks in for good."

"Heh, nope. We all followed your lead, Captain, and retired to the countryside. Ever since Her Highness's passing, there's been no wars worth fighting," said one of the soldiers before elbowing a buddy with a smirk. "And see him? His kid got married recently. This old bastard might become a grandfather soon, you know?"

The elbowed man showed no sign of displeasure, instead grinning from ear to reddened ear. An atmosphere of warm joviality permeated the tavern. There was much laughter and good cheer — too much, perhaps, for a group of men who were about to knowingly march to their deaths.

"Bloody hell, can't you lot just wait out your time in bed like everybody else?"

Dion scowled, but his heart wasn't in it, and it failed to fool his compatriots.

"Led by the empire's finest, to fight for Princess Mia, the Great Sage of the Empire... fight for *her* cause. That's the kind of battle we live for. The kind we'd *die* for. It's a dream come true, Captain, and you can bet we'll damn well swim back up the river of Hell to get another piece of the action."

There wasn't a hint of irony in the old soldier's tone, only candid enthusiasm. Dion shook his head, his tone turning pensive.

"A dream come true, huh..."

It was so trite, and yet, so true.

I think he's right. I've been living a dream, and on it goes...

It had, he decided, been a good dream. One in which his very soul had soared alongside the Great Sage of the Empire. And now that fleeting fantasia was back for one final coda — a vestigial

dream, stubbornly unfading.

Dion regarded his weathered hands. Time waited for no man. He'd known he was already waist deep in his grave; he just didn't think there'd be so much action left before they sealed him in. There was a humor to it all that made the corners of his eyes crinkle.

Bloody hell. I think I'm getting sentimental. I really am too old for this.

He planted himself in a chair, grabbed the liquor served to him, and tossed back a big gulp. The pungent fumes rushed up his nose, hitting the inside of his head with a hot, exhilarating wallop. He did not take a second swig. The first was a fix; the second would be folly. Such dreams were precious. It'd be a waste if he couldn't savor it with a clear head.

"Now then, let's talk business, men. Not that there's much to it. Glory tends to be in short supply when it comes to missions suitable for a bunch of boneheads who missed their cue to exit stage left." He looked across the gray heads dotting the tavernscape. "You stubborn lot just refused to croak, huh?"

His tone evoked the Dion of days past, who still brimmed with youth. For a moment, he was distracted by a vision of faces he'd known, and his thoughts turned to the other cohort — the even stubborner lot who had croaked. Staying true to their charge and station, they'd fought in the civil war, and perished doing so. Even his vice-captain, whose prowess nearly equaled his own, was absent from the tavern today. His grimmer counterpart, it seemed, was loathe to grant leave, as always.

You're missing out on one hell of a party, you poor sods. Luck just wasn't on your side, was it?

In his mind, he poured one out for his compatriots who'd already reached the end of the story. Then he turned back to those whose stories were still being written.

"Our mission, men, is one of escort. We shall protect Her Highness Princess Miabel, orphan and heir to our late princess, and ensure no harm befalls her on the journey to Lunatear."

"Where is Her Highness now?"

"She departed the domain of Outcount Rudolvon in the south to take refuge in Princess Mia's personal domain. To the best of my knowledge, she is currently in Princess Town."

The civil war that split the Four Dukes into two opposing

factions also pressured the rest of the nobility into making their allegiances clear. In spite of such hostile circumstances, the Rudolvons took neither side, proclaiming allegiance to none but Princess Mia herself. Viscount Berman, whose realm housed the princess's personal domain, sang the same tune. As a result, Sealence Forest and its surrounding regions remained free from conflict for some time, the flickering peace like a final, fading afterglow of the Great Sage's incandescent spirit.

Ultimately, the brief respite was just that — brief. Rafina, the Empress Prelate, soon sent her forces northward, breaching the empire's borders from the south. The Rudolvon domain, which bore the brunt of the invasion, was quickly overrun by the Holy Aquarian Army. Ever since Mia's death, Miabel had been living under the Rudolvons' care. Thanks to their selfless sacrifices, she managed to escape by the skin of her teeth and took refuge in the Berman Viscounty. However, the Holy Aquarian Army wasted no time catching up, and it wasn't long before her pursuers were bearing down on her once again.

"Plenty of people these days consider the imperial lineage to be an eyesore. Unless we can find a noble that we know for sure is on our side, Lunatear is pretty much our only safe haven," continued Dion.

Nobody had gone as far as to advocate razing the capital to the ground. After all, for the eventual winner of this power struggle, a cindered throne seemed a highly unpleasant trophy.

"Yeah, I get it now. Princess Mia's still popular in the older districts. It's a good place for Her Highness to hide."

"Speaking optimistically, anyway," qualified Dion. "The truth is that absolute safety is no longer guaranteed anywhere in the empire, and I'd bet my teeth that any shelter we find within its borders will be short-lived."

He let out a sardonic chuckle before emptying his cup.

"Of course, that's the kind of concern that's above our pay grade. The problems we worry about tend to be ones you can cut with a sword. Isn't that right, gentlemen?" he scanned the room with a grin full of humor, but eyes of command. "Let us proceed then."

The room of once-and-again soldiers emptied their cups as well. Then, in perfect unison, they marched out of the tavern with their captain toward the Princess Guard's final battle.

After arriving at Princess Town and successfully making contact with Miabel, the Dion retinue began their trek toward the capital with the princess in tow. Their members, though grizzled, were undoubtedly elites. They were possessed of masterful swordsmanship and flawless teamwork, along with the unbendable resolve of men who considered themselves already dead. At the same time, there was a lifeful tenacity to them, born of a fierce desire to savor this Elysian dream for as long as possible. They did not fear death, but they were more than happy to keep it waiting.

Over and over, they fought off the furious assault of the Holy Aquarian Army while retreating northward. Faced with a pursuing force ten times their size, their numbers steadily dwindled, but they stubbornly evaded capture, eventually making it all the way to the outskirts of the imperial capital where a great river flowed.

Before them stretched the Lunant Bridge.

"Hmph. Well, it's the end of the line, men. Doesn't look like we can shake them off any longer," said Dion, who spat on the ground in displeasure before narrowing his eyes at the looming dust clouds in the distance.

Elites though they were, the enemy's numerical advantage was ultimately overwhelming. Eight old soldiers stood at the foot of the bridge. Aside from Dion, the rest wore more wounds than fabric.

"Lucky for us, there's a river and we're holding the bridge. Doesn't get much better than this for buying time. Excuse me, Your Highness."

He reached forward, placing his hands on Miabel's waist, and dismounted with her. Then he motioned over two of his grizzled survivors. By some odd coincidence, they happened to be the very guards who'd followed Mia into the Sealence Forest so many years ago.

"Listen up. When I give the order, the two of you are going to start riding toward the capital, and under no circumstances are you to stop. Take all our horses with you. Run 'em into the ground if necessary. I don't care if it's on the horses' legs or your own, but you're gonna put as much distance between you and this bridge as possible."

"But..."

The two were left speechless, reluctant to resist and reluctant to obey. Dion bared his teeth in a fierce grin.

“The rest of us, see, were never imperial guard material. We’re not cut out for that loyalty and devotion and jump-in-the-way-of-an-arrow stuff.”

The remaining five matched his grin. They’d all been members of Dion’s hundred-man squad, who were subsequently transferred to the Princess Guard. One of them chimed in.

“Yeah, protecting people ain’t our thing. We’re more about chopping them up.”

Dion nodded.

“You heard ’em. So make like a nice pair of imperial guards and get a move on already. Don’t keep Her Highness waiting.”

After enduring a round of good-natured jibes, the two exchanged resigned smiles.

“Then allow us imperial guards to serve as Her Highness’s continued escort. It shall be our honor. May fortune be with you all.”

As the soldiers clapped each other on the shoulders and traded parting salutes, Dion walked over to Miabel, who’d been quietly watching the proceedings from the side, and knelt before her with his head bowed.

“Your Highness, we will stay here to teach these rabid vermin a lesson. They will trouble you no longer, so please enjoy the rest of your journey to the capital.”

He looked up to find the last princess of Tearmoon gazing back at him, the blank expression on her adorable seven-year-old face vividly reminiscent of her grandmother.

Heh. That’s Mia’s grandkid all right. She’s got the same clueless look.

As if affirming his exceedingly disrespectful evaluation of her, Miabel asked in a puzzled tone, “Uncle Dion... Why?”

“Eh? Why what?”

“I don’t understand. Why? Why does everyone die to protect me?”

He blinked, caught off guard by the question. Then he sighed.

‘Why die for me?’ asks the girl who’s not even old enough to know what death is.

It was, he figured, the result of sovereign schooling. She’d been taught that there were those who put their lives on the line to protect her. She’d been taught how she was supposed to behave toward them. And those teachings... had led to this question. Why,

she wondered, did those people protect her? Risk their lives for her? She understood the function, but not the reason.

"Let me put it this way, Your Highness. The truth is that we're just being a bunch of old boys and throwing a big tantrum. It makes us feel better about missing the chance to fight alongside your grandmother long ago." He showed her a toothy smile. "In fact, we're enjoying this. It's like a game to us, so there's no need to worry your little head. You just let us play our silly game. Go on. And don't look back, you hear?"

She listened without saying a word. When he finished, she straightened her back and looked him in the eye. Then, with as much gravitas as a seven-year-old could muster, she said, "Sir Dion Alaia, as well as the loyal soldiers you command... Know that I shall remember you for as long as I live. You have my word."

Her dignified expression just barely held through her short speech before a quivering lip broke the illusion. She bowed deeply, hiding her face from view, and finished with, "Farewell, then."

She turned and departed. Dion shook his head and smiled wryly as he watched her diminutive form grow even smaller with distance. Not once did she look back.

"Well I'll be damned. This one's a right little marvel. Much smarter than her grandma."

"Hear hear. Princess Mia always had this look on her face that made you think there wasn't a whole lot going on upstairs."

"A sight for sore eyes, eh? The empire's got a bright future with a princess like that. Really makes all this protecting and dying worth it, yeah?"

A wave of laughter rolled through the men.

"Right then," said Dion, addressing his small but spirited audience. "Listen up. It seems that Her Pint-Sized Highness is going to remember this battle of ours for a long time to come." He paused for effect. "So let's give her a show worth remembering."

The sharpness of his voice was reflected in their sharpening gazes. With the feral grins of predators, they awaited the arrival of their deadly prey.

They took up formation in the middle of the bridge. Standing at the forefront with his arms crossed was Dion, his twin swords planted in the planks beside his feet. His glare could have rent steel. Before him stretched a long line of enemy cavalrymen, who'd

stopped some distance away as though hesitant to approach. He scoffed audibly.

"What are you waiting for? Introductions? All right then. I'll go first. Dion Alaia, blade of the Great Sage and finest knight of the empire. My swords will be glad to make the acquaintance of all those who have a desire to meet—"

One overly eager horseman ignored his warning and charged, trying to ride past him and cross the bridge. There was a blinding flash. Extending from his outstretched arm was one of his swords, having traced a smooth arc from the ground to the sky. The horse kept running, its steps echoing loudly in the ensuing silence... But its rider slid off and fell to the ground, armor parting in two along a clean cut through the chest.

"Don't interrupt people when they're talking, lad." He turned toward the rest of his foes. "Life's short, you know? You don't have to make it shorter. Also, you've only got one life, so try not to throw it away next time."

Having witnessed his sword slice clean through steel to rend flesh, a wave of apprehensive awe rolled through the other horsemen. The soldiers of the Holy Aquarian Army were no green recruits, but even among their ranks, few could match such a feat.

"So... who's next for the cutting board?"

Cued by his bloodcurdling grin, his own, old soldiers drew their swords and let out a fierce roar that shook the sky.

The last remnants of the Princess Guard fought well. With Dion at the fore, they repelled wave after wave of cavalry assault, beating back their enemies without giving an inch. Over and over, the riders charged, only to find themselves smashing into the human equivalent of a brick wall. With spikes. After sustaining heavy losses, the attackers were forced to temporarily fall back.

The bridge was held, but at great cost. Five more men finished their journey. Only Dion himself remained. Coated in as much blood as he'd lost, he sat with his head down, already more corpse than man.

"Bloody hell... If only I was ten years younger... I might have... managed something more..." His mutters turned into gurgling murmurs as a crimson line flowed down from the corner of his lip. He spat. "Bah, bloody... Still, I gotta say, the princess sure knows how to keep us on our toes, doesn't she? Wrote us one hell of a

finale. Did you all enjoy your time on center stage?"

He was answered by the silent affirmation of their rigid faces, lips locked by death in bold smiles, forever proud to have given their lives for the Great Sage of the Empire and the precious granddaughter she left to them. They died well, in the place where they belonged.

"Dying in a place where I belong, huh... Can't argue with that. Hard to think of a more fitting place for me than this. Heh..."

With great effort, he craned his neck up toward the sky, eyes distant with a vision of the late princess he'd served.

"But you, Princess... I'd wondered if you might find someplace else... Some other end for me... that even I couldn't imagine..."

A peaceful end was something he'd neither expected nor ever wished for. He always assumed he'd meet his end on the battlefield, his expired body trampled by the boots of enemies too numerous to best. Just like now. This was *his* end. He'd wanted this.

But there would be moments... strange moments when his mind would wander in a flight of fancy... and he'd imagine himself lying in bed under the ceiling of his own room, or perhaps a hospital. He'd look around at the saddened faces of people he knew, most sorry of which was surely his doltish princess, and produce his last wry grin before departing them for good. And... it maybe didn't seem so bad.

It would be a nearly unbearably peaceful and ordinary end, so profoundly devoid of drama that only the Great Sage of the Empire could bring about such a scene, and he'd die complaining about how boring it was, only for his restful expression to betray his acceptance.

There had been times when the thought had amused him. Appealed to him. And now, knowing such an end was forever out of his reach, he felt in his heart the slightest twinge of disappointment.

"...What's this? Am I getting sentimental? I, Dion Alaia, Reaper of the Battlefield?"

A ferocious grin spread across his lips and his blood roiled in his veins. Somewhere inside he heard a voice. It screamed for more. The fight wasn't over. He hadn't had *enough*. Driven by the voice, he rose to his feet. The sound of hooves echoed in the distance, growing ever closer. He closed his eyes.

"Be safe, Princess Miabel. Be safe..."

His prayer left him as a hoarse growl. He opened his eyes again.

A sword lay on a body nearby. He picked it up.

"Hm... I'm not quite done playing. The score's not high enough. Four digits... is maybe too much, but I gotta at least break three. The empire's finest has a reputation to keep up."

He huffed out a breath and regarded his oncoming foes with glee.

"One more round, boys! Let's do this!"

With a thundering roar, he charged forward. His sword caught the sun and exploded in light like the blinding nova of a dying star. It scythed through steel and flesh, a streak of deadly radiance, as it reaped the souls of countless more victims.

The empire's finest, Dion Alaia, fell before the Holy Aquarian Army of Rafina, the Empress Prelate. When he finally followed in the steps of the five deceased members of the Princess Guard, two hundred and eighty men lay slain by their blades. Their last stand at Lunant Bridge allowed Miabel, the last princess of the Tearmoon Empire, to escape to the yet-neutral zone of the imperial capital, where she would be raised under the care of Mia's loyal vassals: Anne, Elise, and Ludwig.

Part B: Dion Alaia's Visit to School

"Leave the frontlines? Seriously?" said Dion.

Feeling a tad bored, he'd dropped in on Ludwig in his office, figuring he'd idle away some time with small talk. Before he could even get a proper banter going, however, Ludwig suddenly hit him with the unexpected proposal. He regarded the bespectacled man dubiously before slumping back in his chair and languidly crossing his legs.

"Seriously," Ludwig confirmed. "I believe I've mentioned this to you before, Sir Dion, but it would benefit Her Highness to have an ally within the Ebony Moon Ministry, and I'd like you to be that person. To that end, I'll need you to climb as high as you can up the military ladder."

"I thought that was just your attempt at humor."

Hunting down bandits... Skirmishing along the border... Suppressing violent revolts... These were the kind of jobs that suited him. Dion firmly believed that the battlefield was where he

belonged. He lived for the blistering tension of fights. Naturally, he expected that he'd die in one as well. Ludwig, however, had no interest in his philosophies.

"I was being completely serious." The solemn bureaucrat gazed at him through his glasses. "I had thought that you were, as well."

In a rare display of unease, Dion uncrossed his legs and shifted in his seat.

"Bloody hell, didn't think you'd get all serious on me... I swear, ever since I ran into the princess, nothing's been going as I expected."

Even if he didn't try for a career in the Ebony Moon Ministry, Dion's squad was going to be incorporated into the Princess Guard. Compared to their days operating as a hundred-man squad on the frontlines, their new positions offered far more glory and kept them much further from danger. Many would undoubtedly find the greatly improved pay and lower risk of bodily harm highly welcome, but their reactions were still overwhelmingly ones of bewilderment.

"It's so damn sudden that my men are, uh, having some trouble coming to terms with their new reality."

"I see. Are any of them resistant to the arrangement?"

"No, I don't think there's any actual resistance... Hard to argue against higher pay. Plus, being in the capital makes it easier for them to go out and have fun."

That drew a satisfied nod from Ludwig.

"And that, right there, is the essence of Her Highness. All who involve themselves with her are forced to change for the better. It was true of me. It was true of you and your men. It was true of the old imperial guards. And it will likely be true of her classmates and princely companions as well. I doubt even the Holy Lady Rafina can escape her influence."

His voice was filled with pride.

"Damn, now that's starting to sound spooky. She changes you whether you like it or not, huh. Even if it's always for the better — which seems like a pretty big if, by the way — isn't that sort of arrogant?" he asked with a shrug, the detached amusement in his eyes suggesting a stubborn belief in his own immunity.

"Hm, perhaps my choice of wording was less than ideal. Her Highness does not change people against their will... It is the will itself that she changes. Those who have no desire to change are

transformed such that they wish for it themselves. They change... because she shows you a vision of yourself that you can't help but wish for. *That* is what's truly terrifying about the Great Sage of the Empire."

"So you're saying she can take me, who has already decided to live and die by the sword, and convince me to sheath it for good? And make me *want* to do so? Tall order. An impossible one, if you ask me."

He gently ran his fingers along the sword at his waist, the motion at once familiar and somehow... *right*. Swinging it around on the front lines was his life. How he *was*. He simply couldn't imagine himself without it.

"By the way, what's that you got there?" he asked, gesturing with his chin at a pile of papers on Ludwig's desk.

"A report for Her Highness. There are funds that she entrusted to me, so I felt a need to detail their usage for her perusal."

"Huh... Hey, you know what? Why don't I deliver that report for you?" said Dion with a smile of inspiration.

"You? But..."

"I've been thinking of taking a look at Saint-Noel's security, so I'll just drop it off while I'm there. If the Ebonies ask, I'll tell them I'm conducting an investigative visit to Belluga."

"That's... not entirely unreasonable. Very well. In that case, I suggest you try requesting an audience with the Holy Lady as well."

"You want me to meet the Duke's daughter?"

"If you're going to claw your way up the ministry, you'll need to establish personal connections with people in high places."

Dion grimaced; he'd misplayed his hand in this conversation.

"Not exactly what I had in mind, but..."

With no good reason to refuse, he packed his things and, three days later, set out for Belluga as a specially appointed military envoy of Tearmoon. His last words before departing for the Principality were the rather ominous utterance, "Well, if I have to go on this bloody trip, I might as well enjoy it..."

Mia was having a very good day. The work involved in transitioning from Rafina to her as student council president was finally winding down, and she could take it easy for the next two days.

"Ahh, at last. A weekend. How should I spend it? A trip to

town, perhaps? Mmm, yes, I think I'll go sweets hunting. There still are an awful lot of stores I haven't tried yet... Oh, I can't wait."

"Ah, uh, Grandmother? Can I, um, go with you?"

Bel, who'd been within earshot, raised her hand in appeal. Having hailed from a desolate future where the empire had long since collapsed, she'd been quickly captivated by the sweets of the present era.

"If you remember to stop calling me Grandmother, maybe."

Mia sighed. Her granddaughter did not seem to be gifted with a good memory. Nevertheless, the promise of an enjoyable outing kept her enthused.

"I'm going to spend the next two days eating every tasty thing the island has to offer!"

With all her attention focused on how she was going to satisfy her taste buds, she was completely unprepared to run into a brightly smiling Dion on the busy main street of the town. She actually screamed out loud at the sight of him, one hand raised casually in greeting as he waded through the crowd to her.

"Wh-Wh-What in the moons are *you* doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in Tearmoon doing... soldier things?"

His other hand held a still-steaming skewer, freshly plucked from some roadside vendor, which he placed under the temporary care of his teeth while he dug through his pocket to produce a batch of papers. He waved them at her.

"I *am* doing soldier things, Your Highness. Official business, in fact, courtesy of Ludwig. I'm to deliver a report from him, so I figured I'd check in on you along the way. Word back in Tearmoon is that you picked a fight with the Duke's daughter. Can't blame us for getting a little worried, can you?"

"Excuse me, *phrasing*! I did *not* pick a fight with her!" She vehemently denied the claim. The last thing she'd ever do was pick a fight with Rafina. "Would you please stop saying things like that? I have enough problems on my plate. I don't need you to invent new ones!"

"Ahh, your reactions never fail to amuse."

Dion chuckled happily to himself before his brows suddenly raised in surprise. Mia followed his gaze to the diminutive figure beside her, who was staring at him, mouth agape.

Gah! I completely forgot about Bel!

"Huh. And who might this be?"

“U-Uh, well... You see, she’s—”

She swallowed back her usual answer.

Wait, if I lie to him about how she’s Father’s illegitimate child, there’s a good chance it’ll come back to bite me down the road. Hmm...

While she struggled for an answer, Bel pattered over and all but adhered herself to him in a hug.

“Uhh...”

“Um, Sir Dion, thank you very much. I’m very grateful for what you did that time for me.”

She looked up at him with watery eyes.

“Okay, uh...” He held his arms awkwardly in the air, unsure of what to do with them now that their usual location had been occupied by his petite admirer. “That’s great and all, but I seem to have no recollection of this event.”

“That’s okay. I’m just happy I got to meet you again.”

She released him from her tight embrace, took a step back, and smiled. He hesitantly smiled back. Mia, who was enjoying the rare sight of a rattled Dion, quickly realized what Bel was referring to.

Aha, I know now. She must have known him from the future. That explains the—

Suddenly, Bel began to introduce herself.

“My name is Miabel. Miabel Lu—”

Horrified, she frantically clapped her hand over Miabel’s mouth before giving Dion a *oh we’re just having some silly fun here* look.

“Hmmm. Miabel... Sounds a lot like the name of someone we know, doesn’t it?” he said with a glance at Mia that suggested he wasn’t nearly as amused as his smile might suggest.

Eeeeek! I don’t know what, but he suspects me of something!

Her cheeks twitched a few times, but she managed to keep up her calm front and nod.

“Th-Th-That’s right. It sounds a lot like my name, right? S-So I decided to be friends with her. Look at how close we are. We’re like sisters, aren’t we? In fact, whenever we meet people, she just tells them I’m her sister, *right*?”

She widened her eyes to frightening proportions and fixed Bel with her trademark high-powered gaze. The younger girl nodded a little too rapidly to look entirely natural before smiling at Dion in ostensible affirmation.

“Hmm... So be it then. Still, I’d recommend caution, Your Highness. It’s real easy to make enemies with a personality like

yours. A cute-looking assassin is well within the realm of possibility." Though his statement was foreboding, his softening gaze suggested the threat was more theoretical than immediate. "With that said, this island does have some pretty beefy security, so it's not exactly easy to get an assassin in here."

She frowned at Dion's remark. He might have meant it as casual banter, but something about the topic smelled fishy to her.

"Oh? And what exactly do you mean—"

Before she could finish the thought, a prescient chill ran up her spine. Almost immediately after, Bel clapped her hands together and said, "Oh, Miss Mia, I just had an idea. Since Sir Dion came all this way, why don't we give him a tour of the island?"

Wh-What?! For the love of— Why would you even suggest something like that?!

She quickly glanced at Dion. To her horror, he wore a wide smile on his face.

"Well well well, now doesn't that sound just lovely. Would you like to show me around, Your Highness?"

He didn't even think twice! Ugh, the nerve*! To be asking me, the princess of Tearmoon, to show him around like some common tour guide! Such impudence! Such... Dion-ness! Augh, how did it come to this...*

She fought back a groan of dismay before noticing that Bel was staring up at her with wide, earnest eyes.

"Please, Miss Mia. Sir Dion did me a very big favor. I'd like to repay him, even if just a little."

Her granddaughter's plea pulled her out of her mental tirade, allowing her to retrieve some amount of composure.

Hm... Bel's pretty serious about this. Whatever he did for her, she must feel really grateful. Maybe even Dion becomes a decent person in the future. Also, there was that whole thing in Remno, so I guess I also owe him one... Ugh, but still...

Her eyes settled on the sword hanging from his waist.

I'm not sure I like the thought of walking around with him when he has his sword...

Being a tour guide meant she'd have to take the lead and walk in front of him. Which meant she couldn't see him... but he could see her... while he had his sword... and could lop off her head if the fancy struck him...

The more she thought about it, the scarier it sounded. In the

end, she decided to impose a condition.

"I guess I have no choice. You shall have the honor of receiving a personal tour by me. I will, however, need you to remove the item at your waist and leave it in someone else's custody."

"Oh? So you noticed. Can't fool you, can I?" He smiled with resignation and turned his back to her. "You heard the princess. Can you hold on to this for me, young lady?"

Hm? Who is he talking to?

Her answer came in the form of a woman with long brown hair who approached Dion from behind. She bowed once. When she straightened, Mia realized she knew the woman.

"My, you're... Monica?"

"Yes. I'm glad to see you in good health, Princess Mia," she said with a polite smile before turning to Dion. "I see that this gentleman is an acquaintance of yours."

"Uh, well, I guess so. He's a knight from the empire. What about him?"

"He did not go through the normal channels to gain entry to the island, so I suspected he might be a foreign assassin."

"Wait, he did what?" She winced, feeling the beginnings of a headache. "Dion? What exactly is going on here? Why is she telling me you didn't go through the proper channels?"

"Ah, well, I was going to cross normally, you see, but then some punk guard with a bad attitude told me I had to leave my sword behind, so, you know."

"No I don't know, you crazy hooligan! Are you out of your mind?! What were you thinking?!"

"Hey, I figured, as your vassal, I had to live up to your reputation as the princess who picked a fight with the Holy Lady."

"There's no reputation to live up to! I didn't pick a fight! Augh! I can't *even*!"

While Mia was busy protesting, he glanced obliquely at Monica.

"Glad to know that any suspicious individuals who come in with a weapon are closely monitored. Nice work."

She favored him with a polite smile.

"I'm glad I've relieved you of your concern. May I have the weapon at your waist then?"

This time, he handed it to her without complaint.

"Can't defy a direct order from Her Highness, after all. That said..."

Without warning, he grabbed the arm that Monica extended to receive his sword and pressed his face to within an inch of hers. She didn't flinch.

"...Yes?"

"...If we're talking assassins, then you've got the smell of one yourself, too. I saw how you were tailing me. Maids," he said with an overt glance at her clothing, "don't walk like that. Who are you?"

She held his gaze for a second before letting out a short sigh.

"I was deployed to the Kingdom of Remno as a Wind Crow."

"Ahh, so I've heard. You've left Sunkland and resworn your allegiance to Belluga, then? Haha, talk about shaking it up. That's spies for you. They flip sides like dice."

His mocking statement elicited not an angry retort from Monica, but rather a grateful smile.

"Indeed. I didn't see this coming either. Everything changed. And so drastically too. But the strangest thing is... Every time I think about it, I find that I'm glad Princess Mia dismantled that conspiracy. The work I'm doing right now is very fulfilling, and it wouldn't have been possible without her," she said as she inclined her head toward Mia.

"My, how nice of you to say that, but I fear I cannot take credit for what transpired. Things certainly worked out in the end, but it was far more coincidence than my own doing."

Mia actually spoke the truth for a change. It was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And not a single soul there believed her.

"You're real talkative for a spy," quipped Dion, his tone softening but still not entirely without its edge.

"That I am," answered Monica. "After all, I'm Miss Rafina's maid now."

Then, with another courteous bow, she turned and walked away.

"Huh..."

Dion chewed on his lips as he watched her go. Only after she vanished into the crowd did he shake his head and address Mia again.

"Whatever... Anyway, shall we get going, Your Highness? This tour isn't going to conduct itself."

Mia acknowledged him with a silent nod. In the process, she

made up her mind.

P-Phew... Thank the moons that ended bloodlessly. But now I'm sure of it. Dion is dangerous. *At this rate, sooner or later, he's going to make Rafina very angry. And a fight between those two is...* She swallowed. *Too terrible to imagine. I-I'd better take the lead here and make sure we don't do anything that attracts her attention... Ugh, I wish I hadn't said he was one of my people!*

Rafina's maid, huh...

Dion followed behind Mia, paying little attention to the surrounding scenery. His thoughts were occupied by their earlier encounter with the maid. Something about her bothered him. She seemed to have combat training, but she was hardly proficient enough to pose any sort of threat to him. Whatever it was, it wasn't that.

Princess Mia. She whose presence forces all those around her to change, whether they like it or not... Hm... He glanced at her, strolling haughtily down the street with her hands on her hips as she described for him the nearby points of interest. *From here, all I see is a kid. And a clueless one at that. Hardly the epiphany-on-legs that people make her out to be.*

To his surprise, that was the exact moment when she scowled at him. He suppressed the urge to suspect her of telepathy.

"Dion! Are you even listening to me?"

"Haha, of course I am. I'm all ears. You were talking about the, uh..."

Bel, who'd been studying Dion's face, immediately clued in. She nodded at him and said, "That's the horse field over there, Sir Dion. It's where Miss Mia often goes to practice her horse riding. Sometimes, she even rides out to the lake."

"Ah, gotcha. So this is the horsemanship club that she joined."

He patted her on the head, recalling that he had once said he'd like to take a look at the place.

"Ehehe..."

Bel giggled, clearly enjoying the head pat she'd earned. The girl was a sharp one.

Mia scowled again before looking around.

"That's odd," said Mia. "Some of the horses seem to be missing..."

"Hey, miss. Been a while, hasn't it?"

A young man in his late teens approached them from the stable. He had jet black hair and he walked with the steady gait of a well-toned body.

Huh... An Equestri, maybe? he thought, guessing the boy to be from the Kingdom of Equestria.

"It certainly has. It's good to see you again, Malong." Mia greeted him graciously. "I've been so caught up with student council work lately..."

"Yeah, I heard from Abel. Speaking of which, you just missed him. If you'd come a bit earlier, you could have gone on a nice long ride together."

"My, Abel came, too?" she said, promptly perking up at the mention of the prince's name.

Her overt interest drew a hearty laugh from him.

"Lately, he's been coming every day. Gotten pretty dang good too," he said before looking out into the distance. His tone grew pensive. "He's changed, you know? He'd always been a bit of a wimp, but no more. Now, he's got the look of a true leader. And I daresay it's all thanks to you."

"My, you give me far too much credit. Abel has always been a marvelous young man. His charms are all his own. I had no hand in it," she said before giggling a little. "Oh, but he *is* so very charming..."

She giggled some more and cupped her cheeks with her hands while squirming like a love-struck schoolgirl. Which... she was. Dion studied her askance before turning to Malong.

"Say, you mind telling me a little more of this story? I've only ever known Prince Abel to be an earnest young royal who shows great promise."

"Huh. And who're you supposed to be? You with the miss?"

Malong looked him over with caution before being placated by the diminutive figure of Miabel, who stood happily at Dion's side. Malong gave his head a nonchalant quirk.

"Well, Abel and I go way back... and let me tell you, that boy didn't have a shred of willpower. Eh, maybe that's too harsh, but it's like he never had any reason to even try. Then he ran into the little miss there, and it was love at first sight. He's been a bundle of determination ever since. Never a peep out of him, no matter how hard a thing he's doing." He shook his head with "I guess that's love for you."

“My, love at first sight?” said Mia, who’d recovered from her giggling fit. “Oh, you’re such a flatterer, Malong. Hehehe...”

They shared a conspiratorial wink and grin. It was *very* eye-rolling to witness for all other parties, and Dion gave an audible tsk of exasperation.

“Also,” continued Malong, “you changed this club a whole lot too. The atmosphere here’s much better.”

“Atmosphere, you say?” asked Dion, rekindling his curiosity with some effort. “How do you mean?”

“Thanks to the miss, we got a lot more girls joining the club. We’re actually running short on horses now. Back in the old days, noble girls had no interest in horses. I mean, there was always the odd hobbyist, but most of ’em just scrunch up their faces and gripe about how the horses smell, and they’re dirty, and their dung’s a menace to civil society... Now, we have plenty of girls coming for club tours. We’re on much better terms with ’em now.”

“Huh... Fascinating.”

Dion regarded Mia with renewed interest.

So the horsemanship club was the victim of unjustly negative perceptions, and the princess managed to right that wrong? She doesn’t look like the sort to do something like that, but... Heh, she sure is an interesting one. Always keeps you guessing.

After a thorough tour of the horsemanship club, Mia knew her chance had come.

This is it! Now’s the time to get as far away from the school as possible so we don’t run into Rafina!

She waited for a natural pause in the conversation before speaking up.

“Well, I think that about does it for the school. Let’s head into town and—”

“Since we’re here already, why don’t we pay Miss Rafina a visit too?”

Mia’s hopes for making a hasty exit were promptly dashed by Bel’s suggestion.

“Ugh... B-But think about how you got in here. After pulling a stunt like that, don’t you think it’d be awkward? Just so you know, Miss Rafina can be really scary when she’s angry—”

“Gosh, is *that* how you’re introducing me to people? I’m hardly as scary as you make me out to be.”

Mia's heart almost leapt clean out of her throat. She spun around, only to look straight into the face of despair. Despair, in this case, had pale blue hair — the color of a summer stream — and clear, glimmering eyes. They adorned a face with crisp, clean-cut features that wore a serene smile.

Rafina Orca Belluga approached them, her steps smooth and graceful. Mia reflexively took a few steps away from Dion, trying to pretend like she didn't know him.

"Miss Rafina? Uh, you see, this person is—"

"Oh, I've heard all about him from Monica. He's a trusted vassal of yours, isn't he?"

"He... is that, yes," Mia said, the light of hope quickly draining from her eyes. "I was, uh... just thinking I should introduce him to you."

Realizing that escape was impossible, she accepted her fate. A lone tear welled up in her eye. She looked up at the sky, hoping it would not fall.

"Hm? Is something the matter, Princess Mia?"

"Oh, something just got in my eye. It's fine..." Mia flicked away the tear with a finger and put her smile back on. "Miss Rafina, this is Dion Alaia. He's actually a knight from Tearmoon, and..."

"Yes, I'm aware. Sir Dion, the empire's finest. Your accomplishments in the Kingdom of Remno have long since reached my ears." Rafina curtsied gracefully. "I am Rafina Orca Belluga, daughter of the Duke of Belluga. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

She lowered her voice before continuing.

"I see that Princess Mia's sword is not so easily impeded. You're the first, you know? To step unauthorized onto this island bearing arms."

"I'm honored to bear that title, milady," he replied facetiously before formally lowering himself to one knee. "My name is Dion Alaia, knight of the empire and sword of Her Highness Princess Mia. For now, anyway, that part's important."

"Oh? Are you suggesting that my friend, Princess Mia, is not worthy of your lifelong loyalty?"

Daggers flashed briefly from her eyes, as sharp as any sword. Mia flinched and just barely managed to stifle a gasp.

"She gets a passing mark for the time being, I suppose. In my personal opinion, of course." He shrugged. "By the way, are you

quite sure it's appropriate for the island's authorities to have nothing but words of praise for a scoundrel who set foot on your soil carrying unauthorized weapons?"

He met steel with steel, parrying her piercing gaze with a cutting remark. His provocation had little effect on Rafina, whose smile remained as polite as ever.

"A very good question. Were you a typical bandit, I might have some sterner words for you. But if you are sworn to the service of Princess Mia, then I have nothing more to say. She deems you trustworthy, and that's enough for me."

Hold on. When in the moons did I ever 'deem him trustworthy'? He's bad news with a capital B.

The thought occurred to Mia, but as a woman of discretion (read: cowardice), she left it unsaid.

"Mia is my friend, and a very important one at that. If my dear friend chooses to trust someone, then it's simply right for me to do so as well." Rafina let out a soft laugh of delight. "Besides, she's the student council president now. Should your actions endanger this academy, I'm sure she'll do something about it. Isn't that right?"

She turned to Mia, who could feel her composure being steadily chiseled away by this conversation.

E-Excuse me? I'll *do something about it? He split a metal spear in two, for crying out loud! What do you expect me to do to a monster like that?*

Mia gulped. Her stomach turned at Rafina's expectant gaze. She was the Princess of Tearmoon though, so despite her fear, she gathered her courage and declared, "O-Of course! I'm the student council president, after all!"

If the other two heard her mousy whisper, they didn't show it. Hey, nobody said declarations have to be loud. The point is that she said it. Whether or not they heard it was their problem.

"Huh... I see you think pretty highly of Her Highness. Just out of curiosity, would you mind if I ask what she means to you?"

Rafina inclined her head and considered the question. Her response came shortly after.

"A dear friend. One of my closest. Never before had anyone offered to shoulder my burdens with me. She was the first..."

Wait, what? When did I offer to do that?

Hearing some discrepancy between Rafina's interpretation and her own, Mia summoned up her courage once more and opened her

mouth.

"..."

Nothing came out. So she closed it again. This was, she decided post-factum, not the time to go on the offensive. Rather, strategic non-action was her safest choice. To step knowingly into danger was not courage but folly, and what could be more dangerous than wading into a confrontation between Rafina and Dion? The Lioness of Belluga and the Tiger of Tearmoon were duking it out. Mia the Cautious Kitten had no business sticking her head between their battling jaws. All she could do was go with the flow. Whenever she was addressed, she simply smiled and nodded, occasionally adding in a "Yes indeed" or an "I know, right?" for good measure. Her only chance of coming out of this in one piece was to take into herself the very essence of the yes-man. She would not say "no." "No" did not exist. Like a professional improv artist, she knew only "yes, and."

"My life had been one of invisible shackles... and she freed me from them. I never imagined there would come a day when I'd feel the way I do now."

"I see..."

Dion regarded her for an extended moment, his expression unreadable. Finally, he nodded.

After saying goodbye to Rafina, the three of them left Saint-Noel Academy.

"Haha. Gotta say, that was an enjoyable experience, Your Highness," Dion said with a wide smile.

"I-Is that so? Well... I'm glad for you then..." Mia, meanwhile, resembled someone who'd just run a marathon — both physically and mentally. "A-Anyway, I'd be, um, happy to show you some more of the island next time, so long as you leave that sword of yours behind..."

So, the implication was, *why don't we call it a day and you can go away?*

"Really? You too, huh?"

"Hm?"

"Your good friend Ludwig said the same thing to me. I see you're both determined to make me give up my sword."

"Oh? Ludwig thought the same? Well, good for him. He knows me well."

She made a mental note to thank her spectacled subject. After

all, what he'd suggested was a longstanding hope of hers. It might even be her greatest wish. Even now, the man named Dion Alaia — he who had beheaded her — still struck fear into her heart. Whenever he was around, she couldn't help but feel he might try to have a second go at her. The trauma was so deep that she was pretty sure her mind wouldn't know true peace until she got this walking menace of a man to give up his sword for good. It was, therefore, a constant wish of hers — one that truly came from her heart.

"So I see... Hah. Bloody hell..." He shook his head in resignation. "Well, in that case, feel free to try. I'm curious to know what'll happen myself."

He then produced an expression she'd never seen before. It was still one of his usual sardonic grins, but it lacked the subtle hint of violence — like a blade that had retired its edge. Astonished by this rare display of genuine mirth, she could do naught but stare.

"What, is there something on my face?"

"Huh? Oh, no, it's nothing. Anyway, since we're done here, I wish you a safe journey back—"

"Miss Mia!"

She'd let her guard down. The relief of having their run-in with Rafina end without disastrous consequences had lulled her into a false sense of security. She thought all that remained was to say their goodbyes. What she forgot was the presence of the third and smallest member of their party — her own granddaughter! A granddaughter who happened to feel deeply grateful toward Dion and was determined to repay the debt.

"While we're still here, why don't we take the chance to show him around the town as well?"

Bel smiled at her, all innocence and excitement.

"...Eh?"

"You know what?" Dion's grin widened. "I think I'd enjoy that very much."

"...*Eh*?"

The glimmer of vitality drained from Mia's eyes, replaced by the matte glaze of a girl who knew she was not going to enjoy the rest of her day.

The rest of the day went as expected. A sprightly Bel led an amused Dion through the town, with a miserable-but-trying-hard-

not-to-show-it Mia in tow. Finally, at the end of the day...

"U-Ugh..."

After seeing Dion off and returning to their room, Mia faceplanted into her bed and ceased all movement. The last leg of their excursion had left her a depleted husk. So thorough was her exhaustion that she spent even the following day, which she'd been so looking forward to, lying in bed.

Of course, even if she'd been perfectly rested, there was a good chance she'd have spent the day in bed anyway...

Thus continued the dream of the princess and the knight. When it would fade — how the story would end — was still anyone's guess.

Volume 3 Fin

Mia's Diary of Spooky Stories

The Tenth Day of the Third Month

I had sauteed lamb with cheese for dinner today.

☆☆

The meat melted in my mouth. It was very good. But the ambermoon tomatoes were a little tough. Minus one point.

The Twelfth Day of the Third Month

I had sandwiches for lunch today.

☆

The filling was made of five types of berry jam. It was sweet and tasty. The shape was boring though. No imagination. Hard to be impressed by these after my own brilliant idea of horse-shaped sandwiches. Minus two points.

The Seventeenth Day of the Third Month

I had freshly baked mushroom pie for dinner today.

☆☆☆

The pie crust was deliciously crisp and flaky. I should make one for Prince Abel. Need to remind myself to go ask for the recipe.

The Nineteenth Day of the Third Month

Today, I heard the worst thing from Miss Rafina. Something about secret societies and Chaos Serpents and stuff like that. Ugh, just give me a break already.

But the empire might be in danger again because of them, so letting them run free isn't an option, either. Something needs to be done... Whatever it is, I sure hope someone will do it.

I think I need some sort of guide. Like that diary from before. Which reminds me, I remember reading something in a book that was in the library...

The Twentieth Day of the Third Month

Today, I saw a creepy shadow in the library. What in the moons

was that? Maybe I was just seeing things.

It might be dangerous, so I'd better tell Anne to stay close to me as often as possible. Otherwise, it wouldn't be safe for Anne...

The Twenty-First Day of the Third Month

I couldn't figure out what that shadow in the library was. Anne came with me to investigate the place where it appeared yesterday, but we didn't find anything.

I must have been seeing things then. I've decided to stop thinking about it.

Just in case though, I told Anne to stay close to me. Better safe than sorry. I can't afford to have Anne be in danger.

The Twenty-Second Day of the Third Month

The stain on the wall looks like a face. It's looking at me. I can't sleep. I know I can't, but for some reason, whenever I open my eyes, it's morning. There's something strange going on. I wonder if it has anything to do with the spooky shadow I saw in the library?

Maybe I should talk to Miss Rafina about it.

Just to be safe, I asked Anne to cover the stain with a cloth so it can't see anymore. Otherwise, it'd keep staring. I'm fine with it, but I'm sure Anne would be scared.

If I'd known it'd be like this, I would have gone home to Tearmoon. Ludwig probably doesn't believe in ghosts. I could have talked to him, and he would have rolled his eyes and told me to calm down because ghosts don't exist. That would be nice.

The Twenty-Third Day of the Third Month

I'm worried about Anne, so starting tonight, I've decided to sleep with her in the same bed.

The thought that the ghost might show up and gobble up Anne has been keeping me up at night. This way, I can finally get some sleep. Now that she's beside me, she probably feels safer too. This is killing two birds with one stone. What a great idea!

The Third Day of the Fourth Month

School is starting soon. It's going to get busy again.

That spooky shadow thing never did show up again. I guess I really was just seeing things. I also took a good look at the stain on the wall. It's just three spots in a funny shape. How did that ever

look like a face? I swear, Anne's such a scaredy-cat.

Anyway, I decided to go back to sleeping in my own bed.

I mean, if anything happens, I'll still be right beside her, so it should be okay. Right, Anne?

Afterword

Greetings. Again. How have you been doing? Following on the heels of volume two is volume three, along with the publication of the manga. I've never had multiple books coming out one after another like this, and it's a pretty wild experience. Just trying to keep my head is a challenge.

Anyway, that was volume three for you.

In this volume, there's a part in which Mia's former archnemesis Tiona and the young nobles who bullied her both become Mia's allies. When one sows seeds, one must also reap their fruit, no matter how sweet or bitter it may prove. So how will the fruits of Mia's teary struggles taste? The answer lies in this volume, so please do find out for yourself.

On an unrelated note, when I started writing Tearmoon Empire, I'd planned for a story that reached a conclusion of sorts by the end of the second volume. That means if you consider the first two volumes to be part one of a movie series, this volume would be the first half of part two. New characters show up, friendships blossom, and all sorts of things are put into motion. I hope you enjoyed it.

Now then, with that out of the way, let's bring out Ludwig, who's been a tad neglected this volume, to sit down for a talk with Princess Mia. The stage is all yours!

Mia: "Ugh... Just when the future was looking so rosy, it all falls apart... Should have stopped at the end of the second volume..."

Ludwig: "As I thought, unless Your Highness becomes Empress, there is no future for us. I shall begin preparing with Balthazar immediately."

Mia: "So... There's no way around it, is there?"

Ludwig: "Your discretion and modesty are undoubtedly virtues, Your Highness, but the situation leaves us with little choice but to ask you to take up this task."

Mia: *What a pain... I wonder if I can find somebody else who can take my place...*

Lastly, a few words of appreciation.

I'd like to thank the illustrator, Gilse, for continuing to provide such adorable artwork. All the hard work that you've continued to put into the second and third volumes have not gone unappreciated. Bel's ones are the best!

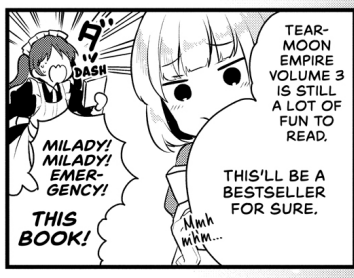
I'd also like to thank my editor, F, who has helped me in many ways. I have nothing but gratitude for the successful publication of volume three. Along with the manga, I hope we can continue going full speed ahead. I look forward to putting out more volumes with you.

To my family, thank you for always supporting me.

To the readers, thank you for picking up the third volume. Your enjoyment is my greatest pleasure.

Let us meet again in the fourth volume. Goodbye for now.

THE LOYAL(?) MAID


DASH
MILADY! MILADY! EMERGENCY!
THIS BOOK!
TEAR-MOON EMPIRE VOLUME 3 IS STILL A LOT OF FUN TO READ.
THIS'LL BE A BESTSELLER FOR SURE.
Mmh mhm...

IT'S CALLED TEAR-MOON EMPIRE
AND IT'S THE MOST AWFUL THING! IT STARTS WITH THE MAIN CHARACTER, PRINCESS MIA, GETTING HER HEAD CHOPPED OFF AT THE GUILLOTINE!
AHo
Tearmoon Empire

AND IT GETS WORSE! YOU HAVE NONE OF YOUR BOUNDLESS COMPASSION IN THIS STORY! INSTEAD, YOU'RE JUST THIS SELFISH COWARD OF A PRINCESS WHO GOES AROUND BEING A DOLT.
I HAVE NO IDEA WHO WROTE THIS, BUT THEY'RE DEFINITELY TERRIBLE PEOPLE!
It's obscene!
Hnngh
U-UM, ANNE...

WHO IN THE MOONS LET ANNE HAVE THAT BOOK?!
CALM DOWN! WE'RE NOT BURNING ANYTHING!
EITHER WAY, WE CAN'T LET THIS THING CIRCULATE. IT'LL DAMAGE YOUR REPUTATION!
SHOULD WE BURN IT? I THINK WE SHOULD BURN IT!

VOLUME 1 OF THE TEARMOON EMPIRE MANGA IS FLYING OFF THE SHELVES TOO!

Bonus Short Story

Otome Game Book II

Start

"Fwaaaaaaa..."

With a sleepy yawn, Mia woke up in her bed. She stretched, the effort eliciting a lengthy grunt, capped off with a sigh of lazy pleasure.

"Huh... My body feels sort of sluggish..."

Her sudden sortie as a tour guide in response to Dion's blitzkrieg visit had left her bone-tired.

"I got plenty of sleep, but I don't feel rested at all. Ugh, all my limbs feel like jelly... I swear, Dion must be some sort of energy vampire. Whenever I'm around him, he just sucks all the stamina right out of me..."

She made a wobbly and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to get out of bed, ending up right back where she started.

"Mmm... I think I'll call this a bed day. Besides, feeling sleepy is a sign that your body needs sleep, so it's probably best to snooze some more..." she murmured, exempting herself from the onerous task of getting out of bed that morning.

When it came to self-discipline, Mia believed more in the "self" than the "discipline."

"...Hm? What's this?"

She'd noticed something. On her nightstand was a jar. She picked it up and shook it. Something sloshed around inside. Next to the container of mystery fluid was a note in what appeared to be Anne's handwriting.

You looked tired, so I asked the cafeteria staff to make you this. Give it a try, if it please you.

"It's... some sort of medicine? To cure fatigue, maybe?"

She took off the lid. A refreshing aroma of fruits wafted out.

"Hmm, the smell isn't bad... but is it really okay to drink this?"

She stared at the jar, contemplating her next move.

① **“Well, since Anne went to the trouble of getting me this, I might as well give it a try!”**
Go to [1-A]

② **“I don’t know… This medicine looks sort of sketchy… Maybe it’s better to leave it alone.”**
Go to [1-B]

[1-A] Drink the Medicine!

"Well, since Anne went to the trouble of getting me this, I might as well give it a try!"

Mia held the jar to her mouth and dipped her tongue inside for a quick taste.

"My, this is quite good..."

The juice was mildly sweet with a dab of tartness. Its pleasing flavor soothed Mia's weary soul like a refreshing spring breeze.

Mia recovered 10 spirit points!

"Ahh, I think that actually gave me some energy. I might be able to head out to town now... But then again, I'm not in perfect condition, and it'd be a nightmare if I collapsed all the way out there. I'd better play it safe and stay within the academy grounds."

She slowly crawled out of bed, left a note for Anne, and got ready to go.

"Time for a stroll. Where to?"

① **"Now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever been to the boys' dorm... Maybe I should go pay them a visit. If I'm lucky, I might run into Abel."**

Go to [2-A]

② **"Maybe I should pay the library a visit. Chloe might be there."**

Go to [2-B]

③ **"Maybe I'll just roam around the girls' dorm and find someone to chat with."**

Go to [2-C]

[1-B] Don't Drink the Medicine

"I don't know... This medicine looks sort of sketchy... Maybe it's better to leave it alone."

Mia placed the jar back on her nightstand and slumped back into bed.

"Ugh... I'm so tired... Being with Dion is so draining..."

She closed her eyes and let the tension seep out of her body.

"I'll just... spend the day... sleeping..."

The soft embrace of her bed was like quicksand, slowly sucking in her body and her fading consciousness. She fell down, and down, and down...

"Highness... Your Highness..."

"Mmm... Hm?"

She heard a man's voice. Soon after, someone shook her vigorously. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Before her was...

"For crying out loud, Your Highness, did you fall asleep again?"

Ludwig sighed with exasperation and readjusted his glasses.

"My... Ludwig? What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I am here to make sure you're not slacking off. Have you gotten all your work done?"

"...Eh? Work? What work?"

He glowered at her clueless response. Then he sighed, twice as emphatically.

"The empire has finally overcome its crisis and is primed for recovery, and yet you're... Are you even aware of your own standing? You are the Princess of Tearmoon. When will you start behaving like it...?"

Like a nagging parent, he went on and on. Mia watched him with a faint sense that something was peculiar. His attitude... His scowl... His disgruntled lecturing... It all felt... nostalgic, somehow.

It's almost as if he turned back into the old Ludwig... Wait... Old Ludwig?

Only then did it click. Once it did, the rest was simple.

"Ah, I see... This Ludwig is the one from when the empire collapsed..."

This was the Ludwig she'd called all sorts of names — stupid

four-eyes, goddamned four-eyes, the whole lot. But at the same time, he was also the person she'd trusted the most. In order to save the empire, he'd waited on her, helped her, and stayed with her. He never abandoned her. Not even at the very end. The Ludwig of then... stood before her now.

"Which must mean... this is a dream."

With that figured out, the whole situation suddenly took on an air of humor. She chuckled.

"What in the world do you find so funny? Augh, do you even understand what's going on?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, Ludwig." She gave a firm nod and looked him in the face. "I understand very well. I still remember it, too. All of it. Everything you taught me... And it has saved me on many occasions. I'll never be able to thank the real you anymore, but even so, let me say this."

With solemn grace, she lowered her head.

"Thank you, Ludwig. From the bottom of my heart. You taught me so much, and because you did, I managed to escape my fate at the guillotine."

Ludwig listened quietly to her heartfelt expression of gratitude. When she finished, he huffed out a breath through his nose.

"Did you now? Good. It gives me some relief to know that everything I taught you did not go to waste. You fell asleep so often during my lectures, I thought for sure you didn't understand even half of what I was saying."

She giggled.

"My, snarky as always, aren't we? But I'm still glad to see you, Ludwig. I've missed you. You and your snark."

A wistful smile formed on her lips. Ludwig responded with a piqued frown.

"Hmph. I see I'm not appreciated. Well, I assume you have no shortage of important things you should be doing, so feel free to wake up and get on with your life," he said with blunt indignation. Then, his frown softened, taking on an air of tender concern. "There's plenty of it left... and I sincerely hope that it will be filled with much happiness and fulfillment. Take care."

Without further comment, he lowered his head in a deep bow.

Slowly, Mia felt her consciousness returning to her.

"Hmm... Mm?"

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and glanced around. Familiar sights exuded a familiar atmosphere. It was definitely her usual dorm room. Ludwig was, of course, nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, you misunderstand, Ludwig... It’s not just about me. You... Anne... all the others... It’s about everyone. Everyone should be happy together,” she whispered to no one in particular.

Then she opened her mouth wide and yawned. A thought flashed across her mind.

“Mmmm... Maybe I should write Ludwig a letter...”

And so, her day began...

The Dream of Stupid Four-Eyes

End - Return to Start

[2-A] Go to the Boys' Dorm

"Now that I think of it, I don't think I've ever been to the boys' dorm... Maybe I should go pay them a visit. If I'm lucky, I might run into Abel. Oh, but wait... I don't think girls are allowed in?"

She thought about it for a while. Then, a sly smile spread across her lips.

"Hehe, I have an idea. If I say I have student council matters to discuss, they'll probably let me in."

She immediately made her way to the boys' dormitory, whereupon the cunning excuse she'd prepared... actually worked like a charm! The dorm warden she encountered at the entrance was soundly duped by her pretext and waved her in without fuss.

"It must be a lot of work to lead the student council. Keep it up, Princess Mia," he added with a smile, even going so far as to point her toward Abel's room.

"My, how considerate of you. Thank you very much."

She returned the smile, maintaining it as she proceeded toward Abel's room, only for it to fade when she arrived — an unanswered knock proved his absence.

"Well, it's not like this was planned beforehand. I guess I'm out of luck... Since I'm here, though..."

She glanced around curiously. It wasn't every day that she got to explore the boys' dormitory. Having successfully infiltrated it, it seemed a waste to let this opportunity go to waste. Figuring she'd treat herself to a self-guided tour of the place, she started walking down the hallway. Upon rounding her first corner, she immediately ran into a familiar face.

"Huh. Are my eyes deceiving me, or is it everybody's favorite princess?"

"My, Keithwood."

Before her stood Sion's cool and composed attendant, Keithwood. Except right now, he was missing some of his usual coolness and composure.

"Is something the matter? Pardon me if I'm wrong, but you seem a little anxious..."

"I, uh... Well, I'll admit I'm not in the calmest state of mind at the moment. His Highness has caught a cold, so..." he said with a

grimace.

"My! Sion caught a cold? That's not something you hear every day."

"Indeed. He's been pushing himself a tad too hard lately, I think. I told him to let up a little, but... Anyway, I'm going to make him a light meal. Something his stomach can handle."

"Is that so? Hm... In that case, why don't I give you a hand? What can I do to help?"

"Help? Uh, but... Are you sure?"

"Of course. I'm worried about him, too. I'd love to bring him a gift of some sort to cheer him up, but unfortunately, I don't have anything on hand..."

"The thought alone is plenty," he said before giving his head a wry shake. "Had this been any other noble girl offering to help, I'd almost certainly suspect her of having ulterior motives. For some reason though, when it comes to you, Princess Mia, I can't help but take you at your word."

"My, you give me far too much credit. I have ulterior motives from time to time too, you know?" she replied with a roguish smile.

For the record, Mia was being completely honest — her motive at the moment was about as ulterior as they came. The second she heard Sion had a cold...

My! Sion, the personification of perfection, is sick? I have *to see this!*

...She knew she had to go enjoy the sweet schadenfreude in person.

"Could you go ahead to His Highness's room then? I'll head to the kitchen to prepare some food for him in the meantime."

Mia considered this request.

① **"There's no point in me going by myself. I might as well follow you and help out."**

Go to [3-A]

② **"Sure, I'll head over then."**

Go to [3-B]

[2-B] Head to the Library!

"Maybe I should pay the library a visit. Chloe might be there."

Mia left her room and began walking.

"Even if I don't find Chloe, I can do some reading... We already figured out that the ghost was actually Bel, so I'll be fine by myself. Not that I was scared or anything..."

She mumbled her way to the library, where she found it mostly empty with no Chloe in sight.

"It doesn't look like she's here... Hm, that's a shame."

With a look of mild disappointment, she found a seat near the entrance and sat down. Her choice of location was in no way related to its proximity to the nearest escape route in case a ghost appeared. Just to be clear.

"Now then... I guess I'll go grab myself a book..." she murmured before yawning. "Phew... Actually, I'm feeling a little sleepy. Maybe I should take a nap first."

① **"Mmm... I'm too sleepy. I think I'll take a nap."**
Go to [3-C]

② **"No, I can't sleep in the library. That's far too improper."**
Go to [3-D]

[2-C] Roam Around the Girls' Dorm!

"Maybe I'll just roam around the girls' dorm and find someone to chat with."

It seemed like the simplest way to kill some time. Mia quickly did her hair and left the room. Since she was staying in the girls' dorm, there was no need to put too much effort into her appearance.

"Actually, just roaming around like this is a little awkward. I should probably pay someone a visit in their room."

She was still considering her choices when she found Chloe shambling down the hall toward her.

"Not here... Where is it?" mumbled Chloe as she approached.

Mia smiled at her.

"Hello, Chloe."

"Yeeep!'

The girl leapt a good inch or two into the air at the greeting.

"Ch-Chloe? What's the matter?"

"Th-That voice... Is that you, Princess Mia?"

Chloe brought her face close, narrowed her eyes, and stared. That was when Mia realized she wasn't wearing her glasses, or, rather, that they were perched atop her head.

I-I remember Ludwig used to do that a lot, too... Something about his eyes getting tired, I think...

Mia had never worn glasses, but she was aware that their use apparently caused significant eye fatigue. That was why people frequently took them off and sat them on their heads.

That must be what Chloe's doing as well, which means...

She clapped her hands together in a moment of inspiration.

"Aha. Tell me, Chloe... Would you happen to be looking for something?"

Chloe jerked back at her question, her mouth agape in surprise.

"H-How did you know that?"

"It wasn't very hard to figure out. You're not wearing your glasses, after all," Mia said as she crossed her arms with a sense of smug accomplishment.

Whatever it is she's trying to find, she must have been looking for so long that her eyes have gotten too tired for glasses.

Mia was not one to abandon a reading buddy in her time of need.

"Let me help you look."

"Oh, but, I can't ask you to..."

"Enough with the modesty already. Look at you. You can barely see what's in front of you. How do you expect to find anything like that? Besides, Mia Luna Tearmoon never leaves a book buddy behind. I'm going to help you whether you like it or not!"

"Princess Mia..."

Chloe teared up as she watched — or rather, heard — Mia give her chest a "leave-it-to-me" thump.

"All right. In cases like these, it's all about retracing your steps. If you're looking for something you lost, it's always good to look through all the places you've been today. Let's go. We're going to check them all."

For an idea that came from Mia, it was surprisingly logical. Their search took them to the cafeteria, then to the library, and finally Chloe's room, Unfortunately, the item in question was nowhere to be found.

"Hmm... It's not here either, is it?"

"No..." answered a crestfallen Chloe. "Where in the world did they go? Oh, my glasses..."

"...Wait, what?" Mia did a double take at the remark. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"...Huh?"

Chloe looked equally baffled.

"If it's your glasses you're looking for, they're right here."

Mia tapped her own forehead.

"What...?"

Wide-eyed, Chloe reached upwards...

"Oh... Ohh... I can't believe they were on my head all this time. This is so embarrassing." The discovery left Chloe even more despondent than before. "And I even dragged you along on this wild goose chase..."

"U-Uh, it's okay. You don't need to worry about that."

Mia, for her part, also hadn't expected the thing they were looking for to be the glasses on Chloe's head and was struggling to find the right words.

"Oh, you know, this reminds of a story that I heard from

Malong."

Determined to cheer up her dejected friend, she boldly took up the role of storyteller.

"There's an old tale they tell in the Kingdom of Equestria called 'Luufa and the Blue Horse,' and it goes like this... There was once a boy named Luufa who went on a journey around the world searching for a blue horse that was said to bring happiness."

Chloe listened intently, nodding along to the story.

"In the end, he couldn't find it anywhere, so he went home. And when he did, there it was. His blue horse was right there, waiting for him to return. As it turns out, he'd always owned a blue horse. The moral of the story is that happiness is always close by; you just have to know where to look. I think it's the same with your glasses, Chloe."

For a while, Chloe simply stood there as she quietly marveled at the ostensible profundity of Mia's story. Then, one of her eyebrows shot up.

"Um, Princess Mia, something just occurred to me."

"Oh?"

"Under what sort of circumstances would you not realize you owned a blue horse?"

"Uh... Huh. Well."

It was, Mia thought, a good question, now that she considered it. There did seem to be a hole in the story's logic.

"You're right... Normally, you'd think he'd realize if he owned something as strange as a blue horse. I wonder what the deal with that is..."

They hmphed and hummed at each other for a while, trying to make sense of the tale. Eventually, the absurdity of it all dawned on them, and they shared a furtive glance before breaking out in laughter.

Afterward, the two of them went to the library, where they met up with Tiona. The trio then proceeded to enjoy a relaxing afternoon of books, chatter, and good old-fashioned fun with friends.

Chloe and the Blue Horse Friend

End - Return to Start

[3-A] Go with Keithwood!

"There's no point in me going by myself. I might as well follow you and help out."

Of course, she did want to go take a look at Sion in his moment of weakness. In fact, she was *dying* to do just that. But...

Entering a boy's room by myself is... a rather indecent thing to do.

Mia didn't quite have the guts to attempt such a feat.

"Really? Well, you're certainly free to do so, but I doubt there'll be much for you to do there."

He started for the kitchen, draping a long cloth over himself as he went. It covered his black butler uniform from the chest to the knees. Mia regarded it with curiosity.

"What might that be?"

"It's an apron. I don't have much experience making this kind of food, and I'd rather not get my clothes dirty while I'm trying things out," he said, rolling up his sleeves. "Well then. Shall we?"

With that, they made their way to the kitchen.

This is... impressive. A little frustrating, but still impressive.

Just as Keithwood had predicted, there was nothing for Mia to do but watch with awe as he zoomed about the kitchen in a whirlwind of activity. Upon arriving, he'd immediately borrowed a knife from one of the cooks and began peeling a Belluga apple. She barely had the time to blink before its white innards were laid bare. A few more blinks, and he'd managed to chop them into bite-sized pieces, spread a layer of honey on top, and nod in satisfaction at his handiwork.

Next came the tubers — what kind she wasn't sure, owing to the speed with which he prepared them. Within seconds, he'd peeled them, pressed them, and stirred them into a mixture of milk and water. Shavings of something or other were then added to the concoction for what she could only assume were seasoning purposes. After some stewing, a fine bowl of pottage was born. A sweet aroma wafted past her nose, making her stomach gurgle.

Before she could say anything, he was already mixing another solution of liquids — this time wine and honey. Heated, the drink emitted an inviting fragrance. Last in the Keithwood meal combo

for the sick were a few slices of ham, cut extra thin for enhanced palatability.

"Keithwood, you're... quite something," she said as she sipped a bit of hot soup he'd poured out for her.

Throughout the process, she could literally do nothing but watch. And not only was he fast...

"Well? Might I hear your opinion of the soup?"

...He was also a gentleman who didn't forget to leave her a role to play at the very end — that of the final judge.

"It's a tad bland, but I suppose it's good for someone who's sick," she answered like a pretentious contest judge before correcting her tone. "But that's not what I meant. Keithwood, I had no idea you were this good at cooking."

She smiled at him, her expression one of genuine admiration.

"Whomever you marry is going to be one lucky girl. If she were to ever fall sick, I can just imagine you doing the same for her."

For some reason, the smile he returned held a trace of a grimace.

"Whomever I marry, huh..."

"Oh? Are you not interested in marriage?"

"More like, I can't imagine myself ever doing so. I've already got my hands full serving His Highness."

"Is that so? I find that rather surprising."

She'd been under the impression that he'd been around the block plenty of times and left a long trail of broken hearts in his wake. The unexpected reply caused a rising sense of superiority. After all, on the inside, Mia was a woman of twenty. Not only that, but she had a boyfriend in Abel, and knew she'd go on to have eight children and build a happy family. She even had a granddaughter. With her vast amount of romantic expertise, she felt an odd obligation to teach the young and inexperienced Keithwood about the wonders of love. With a smug grin, she gave him a few casual pats on the shoulder.

"My, Keithwood. Are you telling me you've never once fallen in love? Love is a marvelous thing, you know? When it happens, you feel... this heat in your chest, and it turns into a kind of pain... but that pain is what makes it good!"

Mia gave a passionate speech about love! In her mind, love was the step that preceded marriage. Therefore, to her, being unable to imagine oneself getting married naturally implied an absence of

experience in dating and romance.

She didn't get to play the expert for long, though.

"Uh, actually, it's not that I can't charm the ladies or anything," he said with complete nonchalance.

"...Eh?"

"If anything, it's the opposite. I've dated so many girls that they've lost all sense of mystery. I don't mind having a girlfriend. It's just that I'm not quite convinced it's worth devoting my whole life to. Oh, speaking of which, that soup you just had? I learned how to make it from my ex-ex-girlfriend. Wait, or maybe it was the one before that?"

As it turns out, *she* was the young and inexperienced one. Who just tried to lecture a professional lady-killer about love, to boot. The embarrassment alone was enough to kill!

"Now then, I think we're about done here. Shall we finish up and bring this to His — hm? What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing is wrong! Hmph! I just remembered there's something I have to do, so please excuse me!"

With that, she and her wounded ego quickly fled the scene.

Keithwood Strikes Back

End - Return to Start

[3-B] Head to Sion's Room Right Away!

"Sure, I'll head over then."

With her mind made up, she wasted no time getting to Sion's room, even breaking out into a jog after waving goodbye to Keithwood. Once there, she gave the door the lightest of knocks.

"Sion? Are you awake? I'm coming in," she whispered.

Unsurprisingly, there was no answer.

"Well, you can't say I didn't knock," she murmured to herself as she placed her hand on its handle.

There was a brief moment of stillness. She heard herself gulp.

"...You know what? This actually is a little daunting. I'm starting to get nervous," she said on behalf of her inner chicken. "All right, let's do this."

She opened the door.

"Huh..."

The inside was tidier than she'd expected. It had the look of a room that was frequently cleaned. She swept her finger across the floor for verification.

"Spotless as well... Keithwood really earns his pay, doesn't he? Not bad at all. I think he could give even Anne a run for her money," she quipped with a pretentious air as though she were the judge of some sort of housekeeping competition.

Then, with the utmost caution, she stealthily tiptoed her way to Sion's bed.

"My..."

There lay Sion, his eyes closed and his cheeks slightly reddened with fever. Mia couldn't help but feel a tug on her heartstrings at the sight of the sleeping prince, his already-potent charms accentuated by this rare display of vulnerability.

"Mmmhmhm... Normally, he's such a cheeky little superboy, but he's actually sort of cute when he's asleep."

The longer she watched him, the more her pulse quickened, drawn to his unconscious allure. She heard her breaths coming in gasps...

"Wait a minute..."

...Or so she'd thought.

"That's not me."

The sound was actually coming from Sion, whose labored breathing suggested his sickness was no minor inconvenience. It started to worry her.

"...Is he going to be all right?"

She picked up the wet towel on his forehead and felt it with her palm.

"Hmm... That won't do."

Despite its dampness, the towel had been thoroughly warmed. She quickly scanned the room and located a bucket of water.

I do remember it feeling really good when a warm towel is swapped for a freshly wetted one that's nice and cool... she thought, recalling the time when she'd been downed by a bad cold.

"He was nice enough to visit me then, wasn't he? Hm... I guess it's only right for me to repay the favor. Consider yourself lucky, Sion. You'll have the special honor of being personally nursed by me."

First, she plunged the towel into the bucket of water, wrung out the excess water, and gently placed it back on his forehead. Next, she pulled up his covers that had become slightly displaced during his fitful slumber. Then... Well...

"Hm. I guess that about does it."

That was it! Turns out, proper nursing was far too tall an order for Mia!

"A job well done, but all that work has left me feeling a little tired... Phew..."

She yawned with the weary satisfaction of someone who was very proud with what she'd just accomplished, sat down on a bedside chair and, using the bed like a classroom desk, curled herself over it with arms folded and head resting atop.

"This way, he'll notice me as soon as he wakes up... and think I've been working hard to take care of him... so he'll feel like he owes me one... mmm..."

With another yawn, she drifted off to sleep.

"Wh-What... What in the name of the sun is going on here?" blurted an uncharacteristically flustered Sion.

His confusion was understandable, considering he woke to not only the absence of his trusted attendant, but also...

"Mmmm... Snacks... so good... But no more... Can't eat..."

...The mumblings of a sleeping Mia, who was obviously

enjoying herself in her dreams.

"M-Mia, you shouldn't sleep here. You'll get sick. Hey, Mia."

He shook her shoulder. It didn't wake her.

"Mmmm... Where do you... think you're touching... you little..."

It only served to make her sleep-talking more colorful.

"I... I guess I'll just pretend to keep sleeping until Keithwood comes back..."

And so, Sion decided to act as if he'd never noticed her. For someone as decisive and prone to action as he, this was an unusually unassertive move. Though it seems reasonable to assume it was a lapse in judgment caused by a fever-dulled mind, his true rationale would ultimately remain a mystery...

In the end, he was forced to lie in bed, feigning sleep until Keithwood's return.

It should be noted that from this day forward, Sion began to act a little less recklessly. Whenever he was about to do something that was inadvisable for his personal well-being, Keithwood would simply lean over and politely whisper into his ear, "That's fine and all, milord, but just know that if you fall sick from this, I'll be asking Princess Mia to swing by again." Time and again, the remark would earn him a grimace, as well as the grudging restraint of his lord.

Thus, Keithwood's appreciation for Mia deepened further.

Not that it matters or anything.

A Dose of Mia to Cure Sion's Ills

End - Return to Start

[3-C] Sleep in the Library!

"Mmm... I'm too sleepy. I think I'll take a nap."

Mia muttered to herself as she flattened herself across the desk. As the minutes melted into each other, she lost track of time.

"Mmmmm... Hm?"

She opened one drowsy eye. For a second, she forgot where she was.

Oh... That's right. I'm in the library. I must have dozed off for quite a while. The fatigue must be catching up with me...

She stuck her arms in the air and stretched, cracked her neck a few times, and looked forward...

"Gyaaaaaah!"

...Straight into the face of someone she knew very well. The shock launched her from her seat with a shriek.

"A-Abel?! Huh?! Wh-What are you doing here? What's going on?"

"Shhh. We're in the library, Mia," he said with a smirk and a wink. "Use your indoor voice."

Mia froze, gave him a look, and felt her face grow hot.

"W-Were you just watching me nap this whole time?"

Her cheeks began to inflate with indignation. To her surprise, Abel's expression grew sober, and he inclined his head.

"I apologize. I figured it was a breach of etiquette to gaze upon the face of a sleeping lady, but you looked like you were enjoying your nap so much that I couldn't bring myself to wake you. I, therefore, plead not guilty due to force majeure."

"I-I see... Well, in that case... Ah!"

It was then that she noticed Abel was snickering under his breath.

"Abel, you liar! That was all a lie, wasn't it? You were actually watching me sleep and laughing at me the whole time! Oh, I can't believe you! You're so mean!"

She rubbed at her cheeks, hoping there wasn't any drool on them. Abel watched her with a bright smile.

"Hahaha, okay, I'm sorry. I wasn't laughing at you, but the rest of it was true. It seemed such a waste to disturb the slumber of a sleeping beauty like yourself."

“You— Eh?”

She froze, caught completely off guard by his surprise attack.

Wh-What in the moons has gotten into him all of a sudden?! I swear, sometimes he can be so… Ugh, just no common sense. How can you say something so embarrassing and… and just be okay with it?!

She held her face in her hands and squirmed on the spot with a hitherto unseen intensity. It didn’t bother Abel, who continued to favor her with a fond smile.

“By the way, Mia, what do you usually read around here?”

“Huh? O-Oh, uh… Well, recently, I’ve been reading the books that Chloe recommended to me. The last one was…”

Mia proceeded to gush over her favorite books to Abel, who listened with great interest, nodding along as she preached the merits of volume after volume. Never once did he show any sign of boredom.

Thereafter, whenever they went on private dates together, Abel would bring up the topic of books with far more frequency than before, but that is a story for another time.

A Library Date with Abel

End - Return to Start

[3-D] Resist the Urge to Sleep!

"No, I can't sleep in the library. That's far too improper."

Mia gave her face a few quick slaps and looked toward the bookshelves.

"I wonder if there's a book that's just right for the occasion... Oh? What's that?"

① "'A Treatise on Agriculture'... Hm, that's exactly what the empire needs right now!"

Go to [4-A]

② "'A Treatise on Hunting'... Hm, if things get really bad, hunting is a good way to secure food!"

Go to [4-B]

[4-A] A Treatise on Agriculture!

"'A Treatise on Agriculture'... Hm, that's exactly what the empire needs right now!"

Whether or not she could even understand a book with the word "treatise" in its title was definitely still up for debate, but nevertheless, she reached eagerly for it...

"Ah!"

...Only for her hand to bump into another. Brows raised in surprise, she looked in its direction.

"Ah, Your Highness..."

It was her former archnemesis, Tiona Rudolvon. Her brows matched Mia's in elevation.

"My, Tiona. What a coincidence. Are you here to do some reading as well?"

"Yes. There are books about agriculture here in Saint-Noel, and I wanted my little brother to read them, so I'm currently copying them by hand. Once I'm done, I'll send them to him."

"I see. That's very thoughtful of you."

Tiona's younger brother, Cyril, was a child prodigy who would go on to develop a new strain of wheat. If she was trying to help him learn, then the last thing Mia wanted to do was get in her way.

"In that case," said Mia, quickly withdrawing her hand, "this book would do far more good in your hands than mine. I'll go read something else."

She took a few steps back. Then she took a few more. Tiona was, after all, one of the people who'd been involved in lopping her head off in the previous timeline. That kind of thing left a mark; there tended to be some hard feelings that carried over to future reunions. More importantly...

It just feels really weird to be good friends with her...

Mia could no longer feel any genuine hatred toward Tiona, but she wasn't entirely sure if she should be treating her like a close friend. It was... complicated. Before she could take any more steps back though, Tiona spoke.

"Um, Your Highness... I'd like to thank you again. Formally. For helping my little brother. Ever since he found out he'd be going to the school you're building, he's been so happy."

Her eyes glittered, pure and brimming with emotion.

"I'm glad to hear that, but you really do give me too much credit. I didn't do much at all."

"That's not true. I'm really grateful to you. And so is my father. Words can hardly express how thankful we are..."

At this point, Tiona had piled on so much gratitude that Mia was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. It wasn't like she'd done any of it for Tiona, Cyril just happened to be a beneficiary of her Mia First policy. Ever *her* conscience was pricked upon receiving so much undeserved praise. Worse yet was the knowledge that Tiona had helped her a great deal during her election campaign, tipping the balance of favors even further.

"Did... anyone give you any trouble afterwards? Any bullying or stuff like that?"

Therefore, Mia struck back! She proceeded to drop an anvil — in her opinion — of kindness and consideration on her side of the scale. Tiona contemplated the question for a second. Then she closed her eyes and placed her hand over her chest.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I'm doing fine. I'm proud to be a noble of the empire, and I live every day of my life in the knowledge that my actions reflect upon the whole."

"I see... I'm glad you're, uh.... doing fine," she said, absentmindedly pulling a book off the shelf as she followed Tiona back to the sitting area.

"By the way, what are you reading, Your Highness?"

"Oh, well, I'm..."

Only then did it occur to her to glance down at the book in her hand. Her eyes fell on the title written across its cover, and she froze midstep. It said "Advanced Arithmetics," and its content was undoubtedly even harder to understand than that of Tiona's book.

"Wow, I can't believe you're reading such difficult material, Your Highness."

Trapped between her pride and Tiona's reverent gaze, Mia gulped and said, "O-Of course! As the princess of the Tearmoon Empire, I need to make sure I know advanced arithmetics at the very *least*!"

And so, she was forced to spend her afternoon slaving over an incredibly abstruse book while battling against her own eyelids and their insistence on falling shut. To an outside observer, the scene of

the two girls in the library was a fond one of friends enjoying some quiet study time. To those in the know, there was the irony of their past circumstances — former enemies, once slayer and victim, now sharing in each other's peaceful company.

In the Library with Tiona
End - Return to Start

[4-B] A Treatise on Hunting

"'A Treatise on Hunting'... Hm, if things get really bad, hunting is a good way to secure food!"

That was one reason the book interested her, but the more important one was the exquisite hare stew she'd enjoyed recently. That had been such a culinary masterpiece that even Mia, with her princessly standards, was left wordless with awe.

"I had no idea... Who would have thought hare could be so unbelievably delicious? I heard that our ancestors in Tearmoon used to be skilled hunters. In a pinch, I can just live like them!"

Feeling particularly excited by the thought of such an appetizing way to stay alive on the run, she reached for the book, only for her hand to bump into someone else's.

"Oh, my apologies. Hm? Liora?"

A glance in the direction of the other hand revealed that it belonged to Liora Lulu, attendant to Tiona Rudolvon. Their eyes met, and Liora hastily bowed to her.

"Your Highness... Good day to you."

"The same to you, Liora. What a coincidence this is! Are you here to do some reading as well?"

"Yes... I'm here... To practice... Reading and writing."

"Oh? That's quite the difficult book to be practicing with," said Mia, quirking her head curiously at the book they'd both tried to take.

The treatise covered various topics from how to hunt in a forest to cooking wild game, discussing each in great detail. It seemed ill-suited for learning basic literacy.

"Are you sure you don't want to use a simpler book? If you'd like, I can recommend a few."

Liora shook her head.

"Thank you... But I think... A book about something familiar is better... This is good for me."

"Hm... The Lulu Tribe certainly has plenty of knowledge about hunting. It's true that having personal experience in the topic can make it easier to read," said Mia, nodding in agreement.

"If anything... Your Highness's interest is more unusual... Why did you want to read this book?"

“Ah, good question. I can’t blame you for wondering. You see, as a matter of fact, I had the pleasure of enjoying some wonderful hare stew some time ago. That was truly some first-rate cuisine, and...”

Mia proceeded to expound to Liora the merits of the culinary wonder that was the hare stew she’d had in Remno. When she finished, an expression of smug superiority appeared on her face. *Liora’s* face.

“How cute...” she said with the kind of patronizing chuckle often reserved for those times when one’s opponent had just made a particularly dim-witted move. “Your Highness... If you think... Hare stew is first-rate cuisine... Then you’ve got a long way to go.”

“My! You mean to say there’s something even tastier?”

What would normally be considered a rather insolent comment went entirely unnoticed by Mia. Well, not *entirely* unnoticed. She noticed only the part that mattered to her — the suggestion that her taste buds still had much to discover. When it came to the pursuit of good food, Mia would let nothing stand in her way. She hungered for knowledge, and she had no time for trifling matters like impudent behavior toward a member of Tearmoon royalty.

“Yes... My personal recommendation... Is an animal called the moonbeast grizzly.”

“Moonbeast... grizzly?”

Mia scratched her head. The name didn’t ring a bell.

“You don’t see them much... In Tearmoon.”

“Huuuh. There are all sorts of foo— I mean animals in the world, aren’t there? By the way, how big of an animal are we talking about here?”

“Compared to the hare... Your Highness ate... About the same as... Three hundred of them stacked together.”

“My, three hundred? That’s a lot of... animal.”

By which she meant meat. In her head, she imagined not a bear, as the name suggested, but a bear-sized heap of meat, just waiting to be plunged into a bear-sized barrel of boiling water and turned into a bear-sized pot of delicious, simmering stew.

“How terribly tantalizing!”

“Yes... And all of it can be eaten... From the head to the toes.”

“That’s wonderful! The more edible parts, the better. There’s less waste that way.”

“Yes... The paws especially... I recommend the paws... They’re

very good."

"My, even the paws are edible? And they're very good? Mmmm..."

"They say the paws... Are good for your health too... And some other parts... Can be used as medicine."

"I see, I see. Not just tasty but also healthy. My! Aren't they the perfect food then?"

In her mind, the bear-sized heap of meat transformed into a glorious entity representing the epitome of evolution — in terms of being turned into cuisine, that is. It was big and round and plump and fleshy and just waiting to satisfy the demands of both her tongue and her health. She had, to her understanding, happened upon the perfect creature — one that was fully optimized for consumption. She was so caught up in the moment of this profound discovery that she failed to hear the last part of Liora's description.

"The best part is... It's so strong that... If you fight it and win... You're treated like a hero... And given the title of 'Bearslayer.'"

The implications of this final statement went right over her distracted head.

"S-So, what you're saying is that if we get more of these moonbeast grizzlies into the empire's forests, we won't have to worry about food anymore. That's... absolutely wonderful news! I must speak with Ludwig about this..."

Mia took Liora's hands in hers.

"Thank you, Liora. Your idea might just save the Tearmoon Empire! I'm going to get them to start breeding moonbeast grizzlies everywhere!"

"Breed— Huh? I'm not sure I understand... But... I'm glad I could help."

Liora smiled. It was an innocent smile, filled with the bliss of ignorance, for she knew not that she might have just single-handedly pushed the Tearmoon Empire onto the path of ursine destruction. Whether or not Mia would actually carry out this patently dangerous plan to inundate her homeland with massive murder machines... was something known only by the great heavens above.

And so, all's well that ends well.

That's what that phrase means, right?

Liora, Mia, and Bears

End - Return to Start

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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